THE BATTLE AT T A RANCH

REAL WESTERN STORIES

AUG. 1959

35¢
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KILLERS' RANGE
by E. E. CLEMENT

SOME DIE TRYING
by F. A. Blackburn

LOOK AT SKINNY!
I wouldn't be seen with him!
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WHAT A MAN!
AND HE USED TO BE SO SKINNY!

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor **Marie Antoinette Park,** Asso. Ed.

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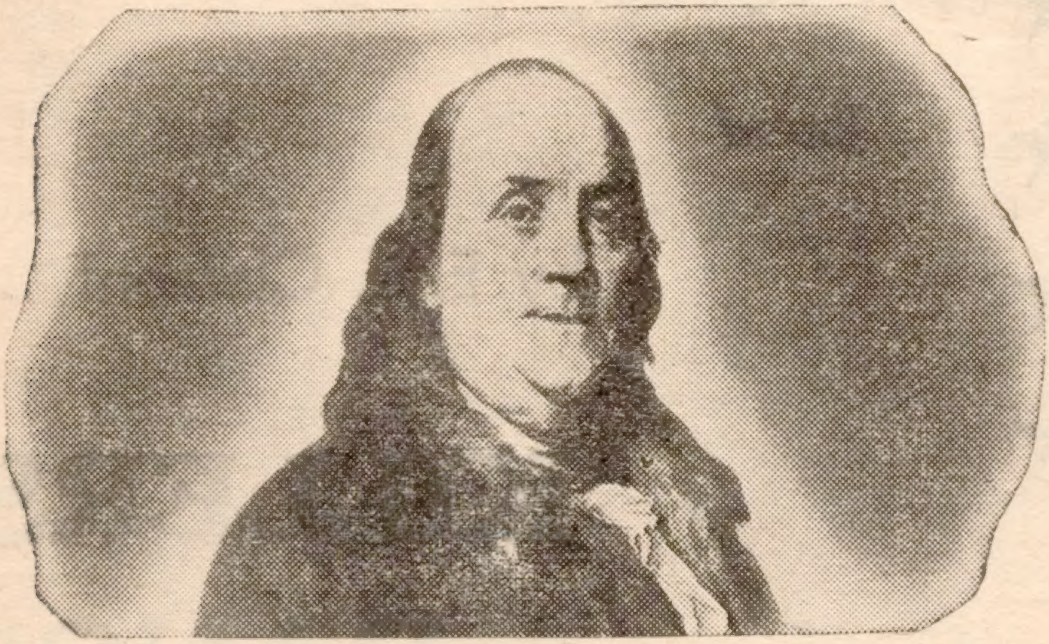

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by E. E. Clement

KILLERS' RANGE

The lobos who had murdered Johnny Winant had shot his sister, too — but Marj hadn't been killed. So they'd get back to finish her off, Steve Doust figured. But if Steve knew Mitch Bronson, Marj wouldn't be rubbed out too quickly — Mitch liked to have some fun with a pretty girl . . .

STEVE DOUST knotted the reins around the hitching rail outside the "Shiny Dollar" saloon, tightened his belt a notch as he always did when out of the saddle, and strolled across the boardwalk to the batwing doors.

It was Saturday night, and on a Saturday night the sounds of revelry were always very much in evidence in the little township of El Monato,

The masked men had killed Johnny...

centered mainly in the smoke-laden atmosphere of the Shiny Dollar. It was the time when most of the cowhands from the surrounding ranches made it their rendezvous.

It was the only break they could get from the monotonous routine of the average cowpoke. They had to have enough fun and enough to drink to last them the rest of the week and the majority of them managed to do both without very much difficulty.

Steve pushed through the doors and sauntered across to the bar. He nodded a friendly greeting to Sam Kessop, the barkeep, named his drink and then turned to survey the scene. He knew most of the regulars in the saloon. At a table in the far corner, deeply engrossed in their poker game, were half a dozen of the boys from Boyd Blake's Double B spread down in the Boyne Valley, south of the town. They were rather a tough-looking crew, Steve always thought. He reckoned Blake must pay them pretty good money, too, the way they threw their wages around.

Blake was also in the saloon, but with his own set of friends. He was at a table with three of the town's leading citizens, Marshal Jed Holliday, Bart Cross who managed the stage-line, and the bank manager, Vince Parnham, who was also the President of the Cattlemen's Association. Why he should have held that office Steve could never quite make out.

Johnny wasn't there yet, apparently, but then it was a little early. Steve was looking forward to seeing his young friend again for he was very fond of Johnny Wiman. He counted Johnny his only real friend. They understood each other.

On the first Saturday night in each month they always met at the Shiny Dollar for a drink and a yarn about old times. Not that the old times extended back such a long way, for both were still young men. Steve was in his early twenties, but Johnny was five years his junior.

Steve didn't like El Monato very much and apart from these monthly meetings with his friend, seldom bothered to make the two-hour ride into

town. He much preferred the quieter atmosphere of his small ranch over the northern ranges. Once he had shared that quiet life with Johnny Wiman, but since Johnny's dad had died and Johnny had joined his sister Marj on the Wiman ranch down in the south-east, Steve had stopped on there alone.

By the time Steve had downed his third drink he was becoming a little impatient at the non-appearance of Johnny.

"Young Johnny's late tonight, ain't he, Steve?" said Sam.

"Yeah," replied Steve without looking around. "He's usually here before me, too. Guess he'll turn up soon, huh? Give me another drink, Sam."

SAM OBLIGED and Steve took his time over it, continuing to take stock of the saloon customers. He had noticed that the Bronson brothers, Seth and Mitch, were not about. Steve Doust could not recall a previous Saturday night when the Bronsons had not been in the Shiny Dollar, making as much noise as the rest of the customers put together. Not that he missed them at all, for he disliked both intensely.

Seth was the big blustering "King" of the beef market in New Mexico, who made no secret of the fact that he was the real power behind the law in El Monato, and Mitch, his younger brother and partner in the business. Mitch was a peculiar sort—one of the rowdiest men in the town with a few drinks inside him, but a different man altogether when sober. Either way, Steve, and indeed most people, found him objectionable.

Steve put down his glass with an impatient gesture. He was not enjoying the heavy atmosphere and he wished Johnny would hurry. He strolled across to the door, intending to wait outside for his friend where the air was clear and crips, but as he reached out to open the swing panels they were thrown violently open, revealing the massive figure of Seth Bronson.

It was all Steve could do to avoid being struck by the doors and he scowled. Seth Bronson laughed. It was a

laugh which came from low inside and rumbled out through his teeth. He stood in the doorway, his whole frame shaking. Steve loathed the man and he was in no mood to be laughed at.

He advanced the few remaining steps toward the beef "King", his face black as thunder. Bronson made no attempt to get out of the way and Steve made no attempt to go around him. His shoulder caught the big man solidly in the chest and the laughter was suddenly choked off.

"Kinda rough, ain't you, Doust?" snarled the big man.

"I'm goin' out," snapped Steve, his eyes glinting.

"I don't like gettin' pushed 'round," said Bronson in a threatening voice. "Don't try to do it, understand?"

The two men glared at each other, Bronson red in the face, Steve's eyes showing his unbridled hatred for the man.

"You ain't talkin' to one o' your cringin' cattlemen," said Steve, thrusting his face aggressively forward. "Maybe I'm gettin' like you. When somebody gets in my way I jus' brush him aside."

"What d'you mean by that?" snarled Bronson, raising his voice.

STEVE WAS conscious that most of the noise and chatter in the saloon had stopped and that all eyes were on them. Some of those nearest to the arguing men moved away a little in case it developed into real trouble.

"Take it any way you want," snapped Steve. "There's mebbe a dozen small ranchers here would know what I mean if you don't."

Bronson had recovered his composure somewhat and his voice was steady as he replied with deliberation, "I don't like that, Doust. If you go 'round makin' wild statements like that mebbe I'll be makin' you prove 'em in court."

"What court?" asked Steve with a savage laugh. "If it's anywhere in New Mex it'd be a waste o' time. Everyone knows how the law works 'round these parts."

Marshal Jed Holliday's clear voice cut through the air like a knife. "I'd like to hear you explain that remark a little further, Doust," he said.

Steve's lip curled as he turned to look at the Marshal.

"Everybody sure seems a little slow on the uptake tonight," he said, "but I reckon there's quite a few folks here not only know what I mean, but know it's true. An' let me tell you somethin' to take that hurt look off your face an' the smirk off Bronson's. Some day you hombres are gonna find someone who looks jus' like a lotta other little critters you've pushed 'round, only he'll be different. He won't like bein' pushed 'round, an' he's gonna do somethin' 'bout it. When that happens I wouldn't wanta be either o' you guys."

Steve Doust did not wait to hear what they had to say to that remark. He pushed roughly past Seth Bronson and stepped out on to the walk. The rumbling voice of Bronson floated out to him as he stood there, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness to see if he could catch a sign of Johnny Wiman.

"If any o' you poor downtrodden little people don't mind drinkin' with a real bad hombre," the cattleman was saying, "jus' step right up to the bar an' have one on me."

Steve spat contemptuously into the dust of the road, thrust his hands deep in his pockets and strolled off in the direction from which he knew Johnny would arrive.

He was getting to be a little worried about the non-arrival of his young friend. He hoped there was nothing wrong at the Wiman ranch. Maybe Johnny or Marj had taken ill or something.

He sat down on the edge of the boardwalk to wait for just a little longer. He did not feel like returning to the saloon, but decided to give Johnny just another fifteen minutes. If he hadn't arrived by that time it would seem fairly certain that the youngster was not coming.

AS HE SAT there in the gloom the renewed sounds of laughter in the saloon came to him. He scowled in the darkness as he thought of Seth Bronson, Jed Holliday and the others who seemed to have not only the town but almost the whole State in their grip. There were still a few small

men who resisted the attempts to get their ranches brought into the beef combine. Johnny was one and there were a few more around Steve's property in the north. Steve dealt not in cattle, but horses, and so far there had not been any attempt to interfere with him.

His train of thought was interrupted suddenly as he imagined he detected a sound in the darkness behind him. He felt that strange tingling at the back of his neck that one always feels at such a time, but he remained calm and made no sudden move. If there was someone there it seemed likely that he was aiming to take Steve by surprise. Any quick movement by Steve would most likely have brought him a slug in the back before he could have done anything effective.

His right hand stole slowly and silently toward the gun at his hip, while the left held the cigaret which he smoked as though unaware of his impending danger. His ears were strained to catch another sound from the prowler.

He cursed himself for being foolish enough to be caught off guard. He had little doubt that the man back there was one of Bronson's men. After the trouble that night, he knew he might well have kept a wary eye open for anyone leaving the saloon.

Steve's right hand closed over the handle of his forty-five. The side of his body was away from what little light there was in the gloomy street and as he withdrew the gun he was confident that his hidden enemy could not see it. He pointed the weapon at the ground only a few paces in front of him and fired.

The shot crashed loudly in the stillness of the deserted street and at the same time he threw himself sideways into the dust at the edge of the boardwalk. He saw the vivid flash and heard the second shot as it split the darkness behind him. He had taken a desperate chance and the hidden gunman had done just what Steve had expected him to do. Steve let fly with a second shot from the forty-five.

He fired at the spot where the flash from his enemy's gun had revealed the vague outline of a man. He heard the

prowler cry out and heard him crash heavily to the boards. He felt sure he had got his man, but he was too experienced to rush across to see if he could identify his victim. Instead he got hastily to his feet and, without waiting to investigate further, sped for the safety of the darkness on the opposite side of the street.

No further shot came from the spot he had left, however, and he realized that he had most likely put paid to the attempt of his enemy to kill him. He hesitated, undecided as to which way to head. All thoughts of Johnny were gone from his head now. People were already coming out of the saloon and a few of the other buildings to investigate the shooting. Steve did not intend to be around when anyone started asking questions.

He had shot a man, killing him apparently, in self-defence, but he was not a popular man with the people who mattered in the town. He knew that, given the slightest excuse, Holliday and his crowd would only be too glad to string him up for murder. And so, as the people from the saloon came towards him he moved rapidly away from the scene of the shooting, being very careful to keep himself well hidden in the shadows.

When he had reached what he thought to be a safe distance from where the wounded man lay he stopped to watch what happened. Someone had brought a lantern from the saloon and was running to take up a position at the head of the crowd. The mob spread out across the whole width of the street. Suddenly someone yelled and Steve saw everyone make for the one spot. He knew the victim had been found. He would dearly have liked to know who the man was, but this was no time to linger around.

II

THE BEST thing Steve Doust could do now was to get well out of town as fast as he could and deny any knowledge of the shooting, should anyone question him later. There was only one flaw, however, and that was the fact that his horse was still tied up outside the Shiny

Dollar. He could not get his horse without being seen and arousing suspicion against himself.

But if he left the horse there and got out of town on foot, the animal would be found and no doubt identified as his. Whatever he did, it seemed certain that he would be accused of the shooting, or murder, if the gunman had died.

He decided to try and work back to the saloon by a roundabout way, get his horse and hope for the best. He left the main street, turning down a side passage between two wooden buildings. This part of the town was deserted, and he broke into a run along a back street until he judged himself to be about opposite the saloon. Then he strolled casually around the corner to where his big black colt was tethered to the rail.

As he untied the reins, a shadow fell across him and he looked up to see the portly figure of Sam the barkeep all but filling the doorway of the Shiny Dollar.

"So long, Sam," said Steve. "Be seein' you."

"So long, Steve," Sam replied.

That was all the barkeep said, but there was a wealth of meaning in the way he said it, and Steve knew that Sam guessed that he had been in the shooting. It did not matter, for Sam was one of the few friends Steve had in El Monato.

As the tall Texan swung easily up into the saddle he heard a shout from further up the street. It sounded like the booming voice of Seth Bronson and Steve's face set grimly. There was going to be trouble and he had no doubt the cattle "King" would lose little time in rousing the mob against him. He nudged his mount into action with his knees and the handsome colt started off at a trot up the street in the direction of the northern ranges.

He heard further shouting from down past the saloon, but he ignored it and urged the colt to a gallop. Rapidly he was putting a safe distance between himself and the town and he knew that in the darkness of the open country any

attempt to follow him would be quite useless.

AFTER maybe ten minutes at a steady gallop he eased his mount and swung around in a wide circle. He had no intention of heading back home just yet, for after the initial excitement of the possibility of pursuit had worn off, he had come to thinking again about Johnny Wiman. Why hadn't Wiman turned up tonight? It was the first time his young friend had ever failed to keep the appointment, and it worried him.

He smiled grimly in the darkness. If Johnny had turned up, maybe the shooting and the scene in the saloon would not have happened. Steve wondered if the two happenings were in any way connected. He got to thinking about the shooting again.

He was curious to know who Bronson had sent out to deal with him back there in the darkness of the street. He had no doubt whatever that Bronson, smarting under the verbal lashing that Steve had given him, had intended to exact swift vengeance. Steve Doust counted himself lucky to be alive, but he knew the matter was far from ended.

Bronson was not the man to give up so easily. Although Steve had apparently killed the man sent out to get him, he knew that there would be others in the gang who would try to even up the score, if only to gain the favor of their all-powerful leader.

Steve knew that from now on he would have to be careful, and there would be more to it than just being sure not to be taken off his guard. Even now there was probably a posse scouring the country around El Monato looking for him. Bronson would see to that. Doust knew that he dare not poke his nose inside the town again, at least in daylight, until the whole rotten crew running the town was brought to book.

A slow smile spread across his face as the sure-footed colt stretched out across the plain. If the Bronson crowd were going to be brought to book, it looked as though Steve Doust would have to be the one to do it. It was time their reign ended anyway. He would en-

joy freeing the town from their grasp.

But first he had to find out what had happened to Johnny. Johnny Wiman had been one of the few small ranchers who had stood up to the beef combine, and Steve had been worried about his young friend. Johnny had more courage than good sense, Doust was afraid, and that was the difference between the two men. When Steve fought the Bronson gang, he would fight them with the same cold cruelty and cunning that they had shown their victims, numbers of whom they had either robbed or driven off their properties completely.

Steve knew the country well, and though the night was dark he did not hesitate in any uncertainty. He had crossed the shallow river and was nearing Johnny's place now. He felt a curious foreboding. He felt sure that there was something very wrong at the Wiman ranch.

ACROSS the river, he turned to follow its course for half a mile, then sent his mount confidently at the steep slope of the hill which was now all that separated him from Johnny's place. It was a rough ride up that rugged slope, but the big colt never faltered. Nevertheless Steve was relieved when they topped the rise and he reined in to look over the scene before approaching the ranch.

Steve Doust was nothing if not cautious, and the thought occurred to him that if trouble had come that day to the Wiman ranch, trouble in some form or other might still be there. He peered intently into the darkness before and below him, but it was too dark to even detect the outline of the little ranch-house.

He listened a while, then nudged his horse gently forward into a walk down the grassy slope toward the house. All was silent. Steve dismounted beneath the big boxwood tree some twenty yards from the house and approached with caution.

He could see the dim outline of the house now as he neared it, and he walked quietly up on to the porch. He raised his hand to knock, then realized that the door was

open. His heart beat faster and he drew a gun and listened. For a full minute he stood there, then, satisfied that either the house was empty or the occupants asleep, he walked across to where he knew a small table stood.

There was usually a lantern there and Steve had decided that it was safe to have some light. That done, he looked quickly around in the flickering light. Everything seemed to be in order, so he picked up the lantern and moved on through the house. There was a short passage toward the back of the house from which two bedrooms opened. As Steve entered the passage a cry escaped him. The dim, flickering light from the lantern revealed a huddled form lying in the doorway of one of the bedrooms.

Steve hurried forward, but as he bent low over the still form he realized that the man was dead. And he did not have to look at the face to know that the dead man was his friend Johnny Wiman. He got to his feet, his face grim, and looked into the bedroom and he paled at what he saw.

There on the bed was another still form. Steve moved quickly across to where Marj Wiman was sprawled on the bed, a gun lying beside her. There was blood on her face and neck and she was very pale. But as Steve bent over her he saw her eyes open and her lips move, but no sound came from them.

"Take it easy, Marj," murmured Steve, and the girl tried to speak again. This time he caught a word or two.

"Steve," she said, barely audible. "Steve...Johnny... They killed...."

STEVE DID not answer. He could think of nothing to say. He was relieved to find the girl still alive, but just how long she would last he did not know. He leaned over and examined the girl's face and neck. There were two wounds on one side of her face, but although they had obviously bled a good deal they did not appear to be much more than mere scratches, and the absence of blood anywhere else on her gave him hope that maybe she had not been seriously hurt.

Her hand reached slowly towards him and she grasped his arm. "Steve," she said, a little more firmly this time. "Steve, they shot Johnny. They think they killed me too, I think. Steve...please don't leave me alone."

"Take it easy, kid," said Steve again. "Don't you worry. I ain't gonna leave you here alone. In fact, I ain't gonna leave here at all. Not yet a while, anyway."

A look of relief crossed the girl's face and she attempted to sit up, but Steve restrained her gently. He left the lantern on a small table beside the bed, then went to shift Johnny's body. He was thankful that the girl's mind was still confused and she did not realize what he was doing.

He lifted his friend and slowly shuffled his way to the other bedroom. He had no light to see by, but he was so familiar with the layout of the house that he was able to make the journey without mishap. He gently lowered Johnny's body on to the bed, then made his way into the ktichen where he found another lantern.

With a cloth and warm water he did what he could to make Marj comfortable. When he had finished the girl dropped off into a deep sleep, for which Steve was again thankful. He spent the remaining hours of darkness slouched in a chair, his mind crowded with thoughts of the past. Of the good times they had had together, and their escapades which had frequently made their lives hectic. Then he got to thinking of Marj. What would she do now? What could he do to help her?

She was the last of the once-happy Wiman family that he had known for so long. She had kept house for her father ever since her mother had died. Johnny had not felt that he could settle down to the comparatively quiet life on the ranch, and had spent most of his time with Steve.

When the old man had died, however, Johnny had not hesitated to come back and take over the ranch, and with his sister had worked hard to keep it going. Steve had missed having the youngster around, but he realized just as Johnny had done, that his place was with his sister on

their ranch. It also provided Steve with an excuse to make occasional calls.

III

SETH BRONSON led the way back to the saloon. The Marshal was by his side and the rest of the crowd who had gone out to investigate the shooting followed noisily. The beef "King" strode rapidly across to the bar, then turned to face his audience. The noisy chatter died away as he held up his hand for silence.

"What we gotta decide right here an' now is what're we gonna do 'bout this killin'," he said. "Anyone got anythin' to say?"

A hum of chatter broke out again all over the saloon, but nobody came forward with any suggestions. Bronson gave them less than a minute, then proceeded to take matters in hand himself. He turned toward the Marshal, his face grim.

"You're the lawman in this part o' the country, Jed," he began. "There's jus' been a cold-blooded murder committed in this town an' the citizens are lookin' to you to do somethin' 'bout it, an' pronto."

Jed Holliday coughed as a general murmur of agreement came from the crowd. He looked at the solemn faces around him and cleared his throat. He was a tall man, a little on the thin side, and with sharp features.

"I don't see as how there's much we can do tonight," he said slowly. "If, as Seth seems to think, Doust killed Boyd Blake's foreman, we'll most likely be able to pick him up tomorrow at his ranch up north. I don't see as how it'll be much good us goin' an' ride like the devil. He's got twenty minutes start on us already."

Most of the men were silent, seeing the sense of the Marshal's statement, but Bronson only snorted. He was afraid that by morning the men would have had time to think about the matter.

Maybe they would get to wondering why Bryce Martin had left the saloon so soon after Steve Doust. At the moment they were slightly drunk, and consequently not thinking

very clearly, and he meant to make the most of it.

"You think that murderin' swine's gonna sit home waitin' for us to come an' get him?" he demanded. "By midday tomorrow he'll be across the border somewhere, an' we won't even know which way he went. We gotta do somethin' right now. If you ain't gonna do anything, Jed, I reckon I'll have to call for volunteers from among the decent citizens o' the town."

"Yeah," growled Boyd Blake. "I reckon you're right, Seth. I know all my boys'll ride with you if you're gonna go after the hombre who killed Bryce. Reckon I'll come with you myself. I ain't a young man, I know, but I reckon this is one time when a man's gotta do what he think's right. Who's a-comin'?"

There was no lack of volunteers, and a dozen or more men, led by the men from the Double B surged forward. Jed Holliday looked uncomfortably about him. He did not like having the matter taken out of his hands in this way, but with Bronson and Blake acting as the ringleaders he dared not interfere. However, he thought it best to make some show of authority. He held up his hand for silence.

"Just a minute, fellas," he said. "I've served you as your lawman for the past three years, so I reckon I'm entitled to a certain amount o' your confidence. If you go after him now, which way are you gonna go? Let's do it my way. What d'you say?"

"I say let's get the killer," said Blake. "I don't mean nothin' agin you, Jed, but I figure it's almost certain Doust'll go home first, get a few things together, then make for the border. We got a good chance o' catchin' him."

THE VOLUNTEERS nodded their agreement with Blake and someone called for an immediate start. Sam, from his place behind the bar counter, called for silence as there was a general movement towards the door. It was so seldom that Sam took any part in the affairs of the town that everyone stopped to hear what he had to say.

"Who seen Doust kill Mar-

tin?" he asked in his quiet drawl.

There was silence for a the booming voice of Seth Bronson.

"Who else could've killed him?" he demanded. "What're you tryin' to do, Sam, take Doust's part?"

"He ain't here to say anythin' for himself," said Sam.

"You bet he ain't," said Blake with a harsh laugh. "He sure hi-tailed it outa town in a mighty hurry afore we could ask him any questions."

"Jus' like I'd have done, or you'd have done if we'd been in his position," cut in Sam. "What did you expect him to do? Like I said afore, who seen Doust kill this fella Martin?"

"If he didn't, why'd he run?" asked the Marshal. "If he was innocent he didn't have nothing' to fear, did he?"

"Didn't he?" asked Sam with a dry smile. "I kinda figure that's a matter of opinion."

"What d'you mean by that?" demanded the Marshal, going red in the face. "You ain't thinkin' along the lines o' Doust, are you?"

He fixed Sam with a ferocious glare, but it had no apparent effect on the bar-keep. His lips were smiling, but his eyes were cold and hard as he looked back at Holliday.

Sam knew he had a lot of friends in the saloon and he knew that, given a lead, some of the more level-headed ones would also want to be sure that Steve Doust was guilty.

Bronson saw what the bar-keep was after and decided something would have to be done quickly. He deliberately stepped in front of Sam as he addressed the crowd, in one last desperate bid to get things moving while most of the men were still in the mood.

"Now listen to me, fellas," he said, trying to hide his anger at Sam's interference. "We all know Sam is a friend o' Steve Doust, an' I reckon it's only natural for him to take his part. I like Sam a lot, like most o' you, but we've gotta think 'bout poor Bryce Martin lyin' over there in the Marshal's office. We owe Bryce somethin', so I say let's go. We've already lost a lot o' valuable time."

Blake and his men made an-

other move towards the door, but some of the others showed signs that doubts were creeping into their minds. Sam was not slow to detect the fact that he was succeeding in splitting the opposition ranks. He was quick to drive home his advantage.

"Is there anyone here knows of any reason why Steve should wanta kill Martin?" he asked.

"What's the use o' talkin' like that?" demanded Bronson. "Mebbe they had some personal feud or somethin'. Doust is the kind o' hombre who goes outa his way to get on the wrong side o' nearly everyone he meets. He's just a bad hombre, that's all. It was only a matter o' time before somethin' like this happened. Martin had the bad luck to be the one to get it. Now we gotta square things for Bryce. Let's go!"

BRONSON and Blake strode towards the door, followed by the remaining five of Blake's men. Nobody else attempted to go with them. At the door Bronson, realizing that his supporters were dwindling, swung around and glared at everyone, but at Sam in particular.

"You ain't done this town no service tonight, Sam," he said. "We're still goin' after your killer friend, but I think mebbe you've stalled us long 'nough to let him get well away. If you have, I reckon you'll be hearin' from me tomorrer."

The seven men clumped out of the Shiny Dollar; a few men ordered drinks and things returned to normal in the saloon.

"Get your hosses quick as you can," snapped Bronson. "We'll meet back here outside the saloon in five minutes."

The five Double B men hurried away to get their mounts while Bronson and Blake went off together. They collected their mounts from the yard behind Bronson's depot and when they returned to the meeting place the others were already waiting for them. Bronson waved them forward and the seven riders headed out of the town in the direction of the northern ranges.

"Better burn it up a bit," said Kennett, a tall, well-built man who already had visions

of being made the new foreman of the Blake outfit.

"Ain't no hurry," grunted Bronson. "He ain't gonna run."

They all looked at their leader in surprise.

"What makes you think that?" asked Blake. "You think he's gonna have faith in Jed Holliday's justice or somethin'?"

"Doust ain't one o' them cringin' little ranchers we've been dealin' with," said Bronson. "He'll shoot it out with the whole town rather than run."

"He's gonna have his hands full," said Kennett with a laugh.

"He's got big hands," snapped Bronson. "Don't any o' you guys go gettin' any big ideas 'bout your ability with a gun. That guy could shoot your ears off afore you saw him move."

"Not all seven of us?" grinned Kennett, and some of the others chuckled.

"You'll find out," growled Bronson. "Jus' don't get too smart, that's all."

"What d' you figure on doin' then?" asked one of the cowpokes. "If he's gonna be there in the mornin' like you seem to think, why did we have to come out in such a hurry?"

Blake turned an angry face to his followers.

"That's 'nough questions for a while," he said harshly. "Seth'll tell you what you've gotta know when he's ready."

THE SEVEN riders had been travelling at an even pace along the trail, but after maybe ten minutes Bronson led the way off the trail across the grassy plain in the direction of some thickly-wooded country away to the east. The others followed obediently, but looked at each other in the darkness. Blake was the first to put his thoughts into words.

"Where're we goin', Seth?" he asked. "Out to your place, huh?"

"Yeah," replied Bronson. "Are you keen on ridin' through the ranges at night? A man could break his neck in that kind o' country. We'll go over to my place for a couple hours, then 'round about sun-up we'll get goin' again."

"If this hombre's so danged

slick with a gun, like you say, wouldn't it be better to avoid meetin' up with him in the daylight?" asked the persistent Kennett.

Bronson wasn't figuring on taking a very active part in the proposed capture of Doust, and he reckoned on having a better chance of looking after himself when he knew exactly where his enemy was. Anyone could stop a stray bullet.

Bronson's place was only a small log-cabin among the trees on a slight rise east of the trail. Why he needed it there, only Bronson himself knew, for he had quite a luxurious residence in the town. However, it was a good place to spend the night.

By the time the first light of dawn showed over the distant range, Bronson's men were again in the saddle; and as they rode, their leader gave them a brief outline of his plan to attack the Doust ranch. The five cowhands were to split up into two groups of two and three and were to close in for a frontal attack on the property. Bronson and Blake were going to make a wide detour to take up a position to the north to wait for the Texan should he decide to make a run for it. This seemed a fairly safe proposition for Blake and himself, for he knew that there was little likelihood of Doust either wanting or needing to try to make a break.

"We gonna talk to his hombre first, Bronson?" asked Kennett.

"What d'you think's gonna happen to anyone who tries to get close 'nough to that critter to talk to him?" asked Bronson with a pitying look at Kennett. "You take my advice, Kennett, an' if you're close 'nough to talk to him, save your breath an' use your gun instead. Anyway, what d'you wanta talk to him 'bout?"

"Well," said Kennett slowly. "I thought maybe we'd give him a chance to clear himself. Like Sam said last night, nobody seen Doust kill Bryce, did they? Besides, we wanta take him alive, don't we?"

"No!" snapped Bronson, but gave no reason.

Bronson was getting impatient.

"We're gonna square things for Bryce, ain't we?" he de-

manded. "What does it matter whether we take him alive or dead? Bryce Martin was your foreman an' from what I've heard he was mighty good to you guys. If you're startin' to get a bit nervous 'bout meetin' up with Doust, I think mebbe you'd better go back."

"I ain't gettin' nervous," growled Kennett, going red in the face. "But it seems to me you're mighty anxious to get rid o' this fella Doust. So far I ain't never questioned anythin' you or Blake have asked me to do, but I ain't gone out to deliberately kill anyone. What I've been wonderin' 'bout is why Bryce Martin suddenly stopped playin' poker last night an' left the saloon right after Doust crossed you up an' then went outside. I reckon I'd like to hear what Doust's got to say afore we start shootin'."

The color was already rising in Bronson's face, but it was Boyd Blake who spoke.

"You know, Bill," he said. "You've always been a pretty good man at my place. Matter o' fact I've been wonderin' whether mebbe I might make you the new foreman out there. That is, o' course, if you're still gonna stay with us."

BLAKE'S meaning was quite plain and Bill Kennett shrugged and lapsed into silence again. The Doust ranch was now visible in the distance as the band of riders topped the peak of the range. Bronson signalled his men to halt, gave them a few brief words of instruction and advice, then he and Blake rode off towards the east to make a wide detour around the property.

Kennett assumed control of the operations, taking one man with him and sending the other three off to approach the front of the ranch-house from the south-east. He and his companion moved around to the opposite side.

Taking full advantage of the cover the trees afforded, they approached to within fifty yards of the house, then dismounted, going forward the rest of the way on foot. At last they had reached the end of the trees and the two groups closed in from either side. They had expected Doust to open fire on them from the

house as soon as they showed themselves, but so far everything was quiet.

Kennett decided to go up to the house to try to talk to Doust. It seemed the only thing to do, since the Texan apparently was not going to start the shooting. Signalling to the others to remain where they were, he strode boldly across to the house, stopping about twenty yards from it. He was careful to pick a spot where he thought himself fairly safe from anyone shooting from the window.

"You in there, Doust?" he yelled, but there was no reply. He called again, but got no response. "Mebbe he's hi-tailed it for the border after all," he muttered.

Kennett approached closer to the house with caution, drawing his gun as he went. When he reached the house he threw the door violently open, but still no sound came from within. It seemed that their quarry had flown. Kennett moved warily throughout the house, going from room to room, until finally he was satisfied that Steve Doust was not there.

"Look's like he's gone, dang it," he said aloud, but there was a note of something like relief in his voice.

IV

THE SHOCK of finding the tragedy at the little ranch-house had, until now, driven all thoughts of his own trouble from Steve Doust's head. But now as he came around to thinking of the killing of his young friend, his mind turned to the Bronson brothers and to the meat combine and finally to his own position.

By morning, he had no doubt, he would be a hunted man. Bronson would see to that. That in itself did not worry him, but it restricted his movement somewhat. He would normally have had to go into El Monato and report the killing to the Marshal, but things were far from normal.

In the first place, he knew that if he returned to El Monato he would be either shot or arrested before he had time to open his mouth. In the second place, if, as he supposed, Johnny had been killed by one of the Bronson gang, Marshal Jed

Halliday would only make a show of trying to track down the killers and nothing more would be heard of the matter.

In a place where the law could be trusted, Marj would have been able to report the murder of her brother when she had recovered sufficiently; but in El Monato, that would be impossible. The very man she would have had to report it to was in the power of the gang who had tried to kill her. In fact, it was most unlikely that she would even reach the town alive.

But what was to be done? To just bury Johnny somewhere on the reach and let it go at that didn't seem right; yet there was little else that could be done. Steve, of course, meant to do something about the killing, but as regards the usual formalities it was useless to think about them. He fell asleep thinking of these problems and when he awoke the first grey light of dawn was lifting the darkness.

He dragged himself wearily from the chair and went and tapped on the door of the girl's room. He was surprised when she opened it. A little color had returned to Marj's face but she still managed a faint smile.

"Hullo, Steve," she said. "What are we going to do now?"

"Not much we can do right now," replied Steve quietly.

"I thought you might ride into town and notify the Marshal," she said. Steve grunted. "Reckon he mightn't know 'bout it?" he asked, bitterly.

The girl shrugged.

"We're breaking the law if we don't notify him," said Marj. "But I know what you mean, of course. Why doesn't somebody do something about the way things are in El Monato?"

"I dunno," grunted Steve. "Scared, I guess."

"You're not," said Marj warmly. "Johnny wasn't either. There must be others. Why don't they get together and run those men out of town?"

"Let's not worry 'bout that right now," said Steve. "Who shot Johnny? Did you get a good look at him? Do you know him?"

"No!" Marj replied. "There were two men, but their faces were masked. It all happened so quickly. It was just after dark. I had been into town. I very seldom went into town alone, but there was something I needed and Johnny was too busy to take me. When I got home Johnny wasn't around, and I went into my room. A few minutes later I heard Johnny come in and he was arguing with somebody. Johnny told them to get out but as he got to the doorway he was shot in the back."

SHE COVERED her face with her hands as the horrible scene came before her eyes again. She recovered quickly, however, and went on.

"One of Johnny's guns was on the table and I picked it up and fired at the two men. It was dark and I don't think I hit either. They both fired at me and I am lucky to be alive. They heard me cry out, I suppose, and fall on the bed. I remember them running down the passage, then I must have fainted."

Her eyes moistened again and Steve laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I'd like you to notify the Marshal, Steve," she said. "I'd like you to bring him out here. I know he's crooked. Johnny told me all about him, but I'd like you to bring him out here and let him see the kind of men he's protecting. Will you bring him for me?"

"Yeah," said Steve, "I'll bring him."

He saw no reason to tell her that he dare not show his face in El Monato. She had had a deep shock and he knew that she particularly wanted to get the Marshal out to the ranch. In her womanly way she no doubt thought that, brought face-to-face with the tragedy that had overcome her, Jed Holliday would feel badly about it. Steve Doust knew differently, but a request from Marj now was like a request from Johnny, and he had never denied Johnny anything.

But he would not go in broad daylight into the enemy camp, for he had a lot to do before risking capture at the hands of the Bronson crowd. He would delay his departure

until late in the afternoon. The rest of the day was the worst in Steve's experience. He did not know how to occupy himself. Though Marj had recovered sufficiently to get the meals and do a few things about the house, there was an awkward t e n s e n e s s in the atmosphere. It was as though he was in the way, but he should not leave the girl alone in the house.

He was worried too, because he would have to leave her alone when he left for El Monato to bring the Marshal out to the Wiman ranch. There was always the chance that the men who had killed Johnny would return. The possibility that they would come back to steal the cattle had not escaped him. However, there was nothing he could do about that. To take the girl with him into the town was out of the question. Things might become a little hectic when he called on the Marshal; and apart from not wanting to be hampered by the presence of Marj, he did not want to expose her to any further danger.

After dinner Steve made preparations for his trip. He felt that the girl was wondering why he was taking so long to carry out her request, but she said nothing and he did not feel disposed to enlighten her. His plans called for his arrival in the town shortly after nightfall.

He knew he would have to move with great care. Should he be spotted and the alarm given all chance of bringing the Marshal out to the ranch would be lost forever, for Holliday would be careful to arrange for himself to be guarded day and night while Steve Doust was still at large.

ALTHOUGH it had been to please Marj that he had originally agreed to go for the Marshal, he now had other reasons. Maybe it had been the despairing note in the girl's voice which had stung him into action, or maybe it was just the putting into effect of thoughts which had been in his mind for some time past.

In any case, the kidnapping of the Marshal—for that was what it would amount to—was now only a small part of his

plan to rid the town once and for all of the evil influence of Jed Holliday, the Bronsons, and all the other crooked elements of the Meat Combine. If he should succeed, he felt that Johnny would have been avenged.

Steve left the Wiman ranch soon after lunch, when he thought that Marj was becoming a little impatient and even curious at his inaction. The success of his plan depended upon his being able to approach and enter El Monato undetected; and for that reason he kept well off the trail and away from any of the scattered ranches.

He could not hurry, being hampered by the spare horse he had to lead for the Marshal, but it all helped to fill in the time and ensure that he did not arrive near the town until darkness had descended. When he finally reached a point from which he could see the little township, the long shadows were already stretching across the plain.

Jed Holliday's office was on the western side of the town and to get to it Steve would have to go a couple of hundred yards along the main street. He felt that he would be much less conspicuous on foot, so he dismounted and left the two horses loosely hitched to a tree on the very edge of the town, ready for a quick getaway.

Although he spent little time in El Monato, Steve knew Holliday's habits pretty well. There was a light burning in the Marshal's office, just as he expected, and even from the opposite side of the street he had no difficulty in recognizing the tall thin figure of Holliday moving about the office as though tidying up before finishing up for the day.

Steve could not help the grim smile which came to his face as he watched from the shadows. Holliday probably thought that Steve Doust was a long way away by this time, little dreaming of the surprise in store for him within the next few minutes. Steve felt a curious tingling at the audacity of the thing he was about to do.

The town seemed deserted, as it usually was at that time of day, and Steve crossed the street and moved swiftly and

silently up to the door of the office. He had a last quick look around, then flung open the door and stepped inside. Jed Holliday had his back to the door and he glanced casually around to look at his late caller, a sheaf of papers in his hand.

He emitted a startled gasp as he looked into the business end of Steve's forty-five. Steve had a way of seeming to drop his head and look up from beneath his eyebrows when he meant business. There was a twisted smile on his face, too, as he fixed his calm gaze upon the startled Marshal.

"What d'you want, Doust?" croaked Holliday.

"You!" said Steve quietly.

"I ain't armed," said Holliday in alarm. "You wouldn't shoot a man down in cold..."

Steve laughed contemptuously.

"Why should I wanta shoot you, Marshal?" he asked, still smiling. "I jus' came to take you on a little trip."

"When?" asked the Marshal. "Where?"

"Right now," said Steve. "Get movin' towards that door an' don't make any sudden movements."

Jed Holliday hastily dropped the papers he had been holding on the table in front of him and moved across the office to the door as Steve gestured with the gun.

"Jus' walk natural, Marshal," drawled Steve. "If we pass anyone, jus' keep on walkin' an' don't stop. If you try to let anyone know what's goin' on you'll get it in the back."

V

WHEN BILL KENNETT came out of Doust's house, he called to the others to rejoin him.

"Looks like mebbe Doust ain't so danged game after all," he said as they crowded around him. "If we hadn't wasted time last night we might've got him. Now I don't reckon we'll ever see him again."

"Suits me," put in one of the others. "So long as he's outa the way, why worry 'bout him? It saves us the trouble o' shootin' it out with him, an' mebbe one of us gettin' hurt."

"Sure," agreed Kennett. "Go tell Bronson he can come out now. There ain't no danger."

They all chuckled and rode around to the side of the ranch where Bronson and Blake came out to join them. Bronson looked at Kennett, a frown on his face. "What happened?"

"He ain't there," snapped Kennett. "Told you he wouldn't sit 'round waitin' for us to come get him. Reckon you won't see him again now."

"All the better if we don't," said Blake.

The seven riders headed back towards El Monato, Bronson and Blake riding ahead of the others as they usually did. Bronson was deep in thought and Blake wondered what he was thinking about.

"What's botherin' you, Seth?" he asked.

"Jus' wonderin' what Doust'll do now," replied Bronson, without looking at his companion.

"What can he do?" asked Blake with a chuckle. "He's across the border, I reckon. He won't show his face in these parts..."

"Don't talk such danged rot, Blake," snapped Bronson. Blake colored at the angry interruption, but before he could reply Bronson went on: "You've been 'round these parts a long time, ain't you? You oughta know what Doust's like. You think he's gonna run out, leavin' his horse-ranch an' all jus' 'cause we're after him? You can get that outa your head. I tell you now, if we don't get rid o' him he'll get rid o' us."

BACK IN town, Bronson and Blake detached themselves from the others and went along to Bronson's luxurious house to talk things over. They found Mitch Bronson waiting there for them. He looked tired.

"How did things go last night?" asked Seth when the three had seated themselves and Seth had provided drinks. "Have any trouble?"

"Not a bit," replied Mitch with a grin. "He jus' wouldn't see things our way, so we had to get a bit rough."

"How rough?" asked Blake quickly.

"Pretty rough," said Mitch. "I reckon you could send some

o' your men out there an' pick up his cattle. Guess he won't be needin' 'em any more."

"Did you have to kill him?" asked Blake uneasily.

"Wiman was kinda stubborn," said Mitch. "Tol' us to get out. I figured he was gonna pull a gun on us so we couldn't take no chances. You'll get a few cattle out of it. What's eatin' you?"

"Nothin'," said Blake. "But killin' a man's a mighty serious thing. Reckon we oughta avoid it as much as possible."

Mitch Bronson laughed harshly. "Why?" he asked. "Reckon the Marshal might arrest me, huh?"

Seth Bronson banged the table with his clenched fist.

"Quit bickerin', you guys," he snarled. He turned to Mitch. "An' don't you be so smug 'bout things either, Mitch. I tol' you an' Cox to go talk to Wiman. When I tell you to go talk to someone I mean *talk*. In future you do what I tell you an' if that don't do no good I'll decide what we'll do next, understand?"

"Yeah," said Blake, anxious to drive home the advantage while Mitch was on the defensive, but Seth turned on him.

"You shut up, Blake," he roared. "You look after the cattle we put on your place an' leave the other things to us."

Blake cursed, got to his feet and stamped across to the window where he stood staring into space, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Seth Bronson turned his attention once again to his brother.

"What about the girl?" he asked. "She'll still be there, won't she? It's a wonder she ain't come blabberin' into town to see the Marshal."

"She won't," said Mitch quickly. He looked uncomfortably at the floor. Seth thumped the table again.

"Did you kill her too?" he demanded, but did not wait for a reply. "What's the matter with you man, are you crazy?"

"We couldn't help it," protested Mitch indignantly. "She took a shot at us. I suppose it was the girl, but it was too dark to see. We shot back, o' course. I heard someone cry out an' fall back on a bed I think, then we got out quick.

What did you want us to do, reason with her?"

"O.K.," growled Seth. "But I reckon you're a bit trigger-happy. Best thing you can do is go out there right now an' get them cattle afore anyone else gets there. Get Cox an' go get them cattle to the Double B. An' don't shoot any o' the cattle that bellow at you."

MITCH BRONSON scowled, grabbed up his hat and stamped out of the house. He found Cox in his usual haunt, the Shiny Dollar, and together they mounted and rode out of the town in the direction of the Boyne Valley. It was early in the afternoon and the hot sun beat down mercilessly upon them. Their task was not a pleasant one. First a two-hour ride out to the Wiman ranch, then getting the cattle together and bringing them back to the Double B.

They skirted the Double B property on the northern side of the valley, crossed the river and were soon within sight of the Wiman ranch. It had crossed Bronson's mind to call in at the Double B to get some help from some of Blake's men, but he thought better of it. After the scene at his brother's house he was wary of departing from the orders he had been given.

"Reckon we'll have a look in the house afore we bother 'bout the cattle," he said as they dismounted under the big tree. "Just as well to make sure nobody's been here since last night. There might be someone there now, for all we know."

They had taken scarcely a dozen steps towards the house when Bronson stopped suddenly and grasped his companion's arm. Cox looked at him in surprise as Bronson reached for his gun, his eyes narrowing.

"What's the matter?" asked Cox. "Somethin' wrong?"

"Yeah," said Bronson tightly. "I reckon there might be. Can't you see? The door's closed, ain't it. We didn't bother to close it last night, I don't think. We left in kind of a hurry, didn't we? We'd better be careful. Either one of 'em is still alive, or else somebody has been here since we left. Might still be here. You better go 'round the back, an' I'll go in through the front."

Cox made a wide detour to the back of the house. After waiting a few minutes, Bronson approached the house and began to mount the couple of steps to the front porch.

"Stop where you are, Mitch Bronson!"

Bronson froze in his tracks as the voice of Marj Wiman cut through the quiet of the sultry afternoon. The voice had come from inside the house. Most likely the girl was watching him through the window but he could not see her. Though he had a gun in his hand he made no attempt to use it. At best he could only send a blind shot at the window and he had no doubt the girl would have a gun trained on him. It was a time when a few well-chosen words were better than a chance shot.

"What's the matter, Miss Wiman?" called Bronson. "I've come to call on Johnny."

"With a gun in your hand?"

The girl's voice was icy-calm and Bronson was stumped for an answer.

"O.K.," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "I ain't come to see Johnny, but I'm a comin' in."

"No you're not," said the girl quickly. "I've got you covered and if you take another step I'll shoot you. I mean it, so don't..."

HER VOICE broke off suddenly with a stifled scream and Bronson smiled with relief. Cox called from inside the house and Bronson threw up the window and climbed in. Marj was standing in the center of the room with Cox behind her, pinning her arms. She looked defiantly at the outlaw.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "Aren't you satisfied with what you've already done? Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Take it easy, kid," said Bronson. He looked at the marks on the girl's face. "Looks like we didn't hurt you much last night after all. You know too much 'bout us now to let you stay here. Tie her up, Cox, an' we'll take the young lady for a little ride. When I get back we can take care o' the cattle."

Marj was soon trussed up

and the two men carried her struggling outside and bundled her on a horse. Bronson mounted behind her and they headed for the cabin hideout north of El Monato. He discarded the idea of taking her to the Double B, because there were some of the cowhands at Blake's place who might have objected to the murder of Wiman and the treatment being given his sister.

He left Cox to keep an eye on things until he returned, which looked like being early the following morning. It was a nightmare ride for Marj, for although they travelled only comparatively slowly her control of the animal was so limited that she was more or less a dead weight on its back.

When the ride ended, some three hours later, she was nearing a state of collapse and was beyond caring what happened to her. Inside the cabin Bronson found enough food for a crude meal from the supplies which were always kept there and loosened the girl's bonds just sufficiently to allow her to eat from the plate he placed before her.

The meal completed, Bronson again made sure that she was securely tied, then snatched a few hours of sleep before starting out on the return journey to the Wiman ranch. It was already well after sundown and he decided that he and Cox would not try to bring the cattle across to the Double B during the night, but would wait until early next day.

VI

"WHERE ARE we goin', Doust?" asked the Marshal as they headed out across the open plain.

"There's a lady wants to talk to you," Steve replied. "She asked me to get you to come out to her place so you could see jus' what sort o' things you're letting Bronson an' his crowd get away with. Maybe she thinks you might do somethin' 'bout it. She don't know you're just as big a crook as they are."

The Marshal was silent for a while, then asked, "Who's the lady?"

"Gal by the name o' Marj Wiman," said Steve.

"What happened?" asked Holliday. "Somethin' wrong at the Wiman ranch?"

"Johnny was killed last night," said Steve bitterly. "Marj asked me to go get you."

"I didn't do it," protested the Marshal in alarm. "I didn't know nothin' 'bout it."

"I know you didn't do it, Holliday," snapped Steve. "You wouldn't be sittin' on that hoss if I thought you did it. But I ain't so sure you don't know who did. Still, we'll see 'bout that when we get there."

The two men lapsed into silence again and nothing further was said until they had come within sight of the ranch. Steve called on Holliday to dismount.

"May be better if we go in 'round the back," he said. "Mebbe Marj ain't alone. Remember what I said back in town. Jus' try anythin' smart an' you get a back full o' lead."

Helped along by the prodding of Steve's gun in his back the Marshal led the way cautiously around to the back of the house. There was a light burning in the kitchen and Steve held the gun firmly planted in Holliday's back while he peered in through the window.

What he saw caused him to hold his breath. Dan Cox, Mitch Bronson's pal was sitting at the table, a bottle of whiskey and a glass before him and he was obviously pretty drunk. This was trouble, for Steve knew that with Cox in the house Marj could not still be there, unless she was being held by force, perhaps locked in her room. Steve's eyes blazed as fear for the safety of the girl rose in his heart. Steve hesitated for a minute, then whispered in the Marshal's ear.

"Go in like you're on your own," he said. He did not bother to add a threat to his order, for he knew Holiday was pretty badly scared. The Marshal pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Drunk though he was, Cox looked up sharply, pulling out his gun as he did so. When he saw who the intruder was a

foolish drunken grin spread over his stubbled face.

"Why Jed!" he said. "Come right on in. Say, I sure am glad to see you. It's mighty lonely here waitin' for Mitch to come back. If I hadn't found this bottle o' red-eye, I reckon I might've hi-tailed it back to town for a while."

JED HOLLIDAY was in a spot, but there was nothing he could do about it. He knew that Steve would be watching through the window, almost certainly with a gun trained on him, and he knew he must continue to act naturally if he were to live. At the same time, if he were to escape from Steve's captivity he must think of some way in which to warn Cox. To gain time he said the first thing he could think of, but the moment the words were out he could have kicked himself.

"Where did Mitch go?" he asked, then realized that the answer was probably the one thing Steve wanted to hear.

"Took the girl to his brother's shack," said Cox. "She knows too much, but after the bawlin' out Seth gave him, Mitch wasn't game to kill the girl."

Cox filled his glass again, draining the bottle, while the Marshal's eyes strayed to where Cox's gun lay on the table. He felt tempted to try something, but it took all his courage to decide that it was worth the risk.

Not normally an active man his dive at the weapon on the table was a clumsy one. His outstretched hand clutched at the gun, failed to grasp it cleanly, and only succeeded in upsetting the table sufficiently to knock over the lamp. As the room was suddenly plunged into darkness a shot came through the window and there was an agonized cry as it found a human target in the gloom.

Steve Doust smiled grimly when he heard the cry which told him that one of the men in the room had been hit. He kept back from the window, however, for the faint light from the sky might have made his outline discernible from within the room. He listened intently for any further sound, but none came. He wondered which of the two he had hit,

and what the other man would do.

Steve had fired the very instant he had seen the Marshal dive for the table and he was inclined to think that it was Holliday whom he had hit, but he wasn't sure. Maybe Cox was lying low there, waiting for Steve to make a move.

He knew that he would be wise to play a waiting game himself, but he also knew that there was a possibility that the man who had escaped the first shot might be able to move silently through the house towards the front door and get away. It was essential that Steve should prevent word of his presence at the Wiman ranch from getting back to the Bronson gang in the town.

Feeling pretty sure that the man who had been shot was now the only one left in the kitchen, Steve played a hunch and sped around to the front of the house. As he rounded the corner he could see a flying figure racing towards a clump of trees. He saw the man hurriedly mount a horse and head for the rise.

Steve knew that the man had moved much more quickly than the aged Marshal could have done. He hesitated only a second, then decided that he should try to prevent Cox's escape. He sped quickly across to where he had left his colt and leaped nimbly into the saddle. As he started off in hot pursuit of the outlaw he saw for an instant the dim outline of horse and rider as they topped the rise, then disappeared from view.

The big colt eagerly answered Steve's call for an effort and as they reached the top of the rise the fleeting rider was visible again for a second, and Steve was confident that he could overtake the outlaw. While he rode Steve's mind was filled with more than just his thoughts of the fleeing rider.

HE WONDERED if his shot had killed the Marshal or only wounded him. Not that it would worry him if his shot had been fatal, for Jed Holliday, condoning as he had the endless stream of outrages perpetrated by the Bronson gang, was to Steve's mind just as much a criminal as were the infamous brothers.

And his thoughts, too, were on the fate which may have overtaken Marj Wiman. All he knew was that Mitch Bronson had taken the girl to his brother's shack. Where that shack was he did not even know, but it was something he meant to find out from Cox within a few minutes if he could overtake him. He shuddered at the thought of the defenceless girl even now in the hands of Mitch Bronson.

Steve knew the country over which the chase was taking place exceedingly well, much better, he imagined, than did Cox. Consequently, he was able to ride with more confidence and certainty than his quarry, and he felt sure he could catch the outlaw by the time the river had been reached.

He was right, for as the hills were left behind and the country flattened out around the river he found that Cox was no more than a couple of hundred yards ahead of him. Steve ducked involuntarily as the outlaw swung around in the saddle and fired at his pursuer, but it was purely a desperation shot to which Steve did not even bother to reply.

Quickly the gap between the two horsemen was reduced and Steve was prepared for another desperate shot from the outlaw. This time it would be much closer and consequently more dangerous. With only a few feet separating them Steve was contemplating a leap at Cox, but before he could do so the unexpected happened.

Cox's horse apparently struck a patch of loose ground and the animal's legs suddenly buckled beneath it. Horse and rider came heavily to earth and it was all Steve could do to avoid crashing into them.

Cox, the worst effects of the whiskey having apparently been shaken off by the excitement of the chase, took the fall well, and to Steve's surprise was already getting to his feet as Steve's mount came to a slithering halt and its rider jumped from the saddle.

The two men crashed heavily together, with Steve on top, but the outlaw, although short, was of powerful build and with a supreme effort he managed to throw his assailant off.

Steve scrambled quickly to his feet as Cox threw a savage right hand at his face. The blow missed and Steve brought his clenched fist up sharply to catch the outlaw hard in the stomach. With a grunt Cox doubled up and fell to the ground and Steve leaped upon him.

He managed to get in a quick punch to the outlaw's face, but before he could deliver another telling blow Cox, showing surprising agility, wriggled out from underneath. Before Steve could regain his feet Cox was upon him once more and Steve felt the outlaw's hands tightening in a grip about his throat. He felt Cox's hot breath upon his face as he struggled to free himself from the outlaw's grasp.

"This is the finish for you, Doust," Cox hissed. "What you're gonna get now is for the Marshal."

His fingers increased the pressure upon Steve's throat and the Texan's head began to swim. He summoned every ounce of his strength in a last desperate bid to escape strangulation. He heaved and kicked violently, succeeded in getting Cox off balance, then twisted suddenly to one side.

THE OUTLAW'S fingers loosened only a little, but it was enough for Steve to break free. His sudden heave sent him rolling down the bank of the river and he felt the sudden cold of the water on his face. It had a reviving effect upon him and as Cox came scrambling down after him Steve planted a foot in the man's chest and sent him flying.

Cox landed awkwardly, and the sight of him lying flat on his back and obviously hurt, brought new life to Steve. He brought up his knee into the outlaw's face as he attempted to rise. Cox cried out with pain and went back limply.

When Steve fought for his life he was like anyone else, and it was definitely all in. If a knee or a boot could help the tide his way he did not hesitate to use them. As Cox tried to sit up again Steve sent him crashing back to earth once more with a glancing blow from his boot, then dropped upon his enemy.

He drew his gun, it was the

first opportunity he had had to do so, and held the muzzle pressed tightly against the outlaw's throat. Cox struggled for breath, but the last two blows had so weakened him that he could no longer hope to offer any real resistance. Steve bent low over Cox.

"All I gotta do, Cox, is pull this trigger an you're finished good an' proper," he snarled. "Where's this shack o' Bronson's? If you don't tell me quicksmart, you'll get a slug in three seconds."

Cox was helpless and he knew it. "Up north," he muttered, "in the hills."

"If I let you live, will you take me to it?"

"Sure, I'll take you there," said Cox hoarsely.

"O.K.," said Steve grimly. "But don't get any ideas. I'm gonna tie you up an' tie you to your hoss."

"How you gonna do that?" Cox sneered, clutching at straws. "You're in a fix, Doust. If you shoot me you'll never find the Wiman girl, an' if you don't shoot me how're you gonna tie me up?"

Steve laughed harshly.

"Guess I'll try it this way," he said, and he drew the second gun from its holster, tossed it up and caught it by the barrel, then brought the butt down hard on the outlaw's forehead.

VII

MITCH BRONSON was a worried man as next morning he made his way to the Wiman property. He had left Marj securely bound in his brother's shack and was now on his way to give Cox a hand to shift the cattle over to the Double B.

It had come as a great shock to him to find that the girl was still alive, and he was conscious of the fact that while she lived she was a potential danger to them. Admittedly, the Marshal would not do anything should Marj get into El Monato and report the killing of her brother to him, but that did not mean that there was no danger.

If Mitch could have his own way he would have done away with the Wiman girl immediately, but there was always Seth to consider. Mitch had always followed his brother in

everything, and he knew from past experience that Seth disliked nothing so much as anyone in the gang acting without his special orders.

After the bawling out he had received from his brother the previous day, he was not game to do anything about the girl until he had reported the matter to Seth, but he did not like the idea of leaving her alone in the shack for very long, lest she should somehow manage to escape, reach the town, and bring down the wrath of public opinion against them.

As he neared the Wiman place, therefore, there was plenty to occupy his mind, and he decided that he and Dan Cox should remove the Wimans' small herd of cattle as quickly as possible and then return to town to see what Seth wanted done with the girl. He could see no alternative to killing her, but it was best not to get on the wrong side of Seth too often.

He rode right up to the house, slipped out of the saddle and called to Cox as he mounted the steps to the front porch. No answer came from within the house and Mitch cursed angrily. He was well aware of Cox's weakness for whiskey and he would not have been surprised had his friend found some in the house during his absence and was now sleeping it off.

When a second call also failed to bring any response, however, Bronson realized that maybe a little caution would not be out of place, in case anything had gone wrong while he had been away.

He drew his gun, opened the door quietly and went inside. He was alarmed when a search of the two bedrooms failed to reveal his friend, and he made his way out to the kitchen. A startled gasp escaped him as his eyes took in the scene before him.

There was no sign of Cox, but it was very evident indeed that his fear of trouble had been well-founded. The table was overturned, as were both chairs, and he could see the legs of a man just showing around the end of the upturned table.

He hurried around, expecting to find Dan Cox, but was amazed as he instantly recognized the tall thin figure of

Jed Holliday. He rolled the body of the Marshal over, although it was far from necessary as the dark stain of dried blood on the bare boards of the floor around Holliday's head told its own tale.

Bronson was close to panic as he stood there looking down at the body. What had brought the Marshal out to the Wiman place anyway? And where was Cox? The name of Steve Doust came instantly to his mind and fear began to grip at his heart. Who else but Doust could have done this?

He looked quickly around the room, then rushed across to the window as he realized that Doust might still be somewhere about on the property, if not actually in the house. He felt a sudden urge to get out of the house and away from the place as quickly as he possibly could.

THROWING caution to the winds, he ran out across the porch, leaped into the saddle and was off at a mad gallop towards El Monato. If, as he had supposed, Cox had met a similar fate to Holliday, it looked as though Doust was making an attack on the gang and might even be attempting to wipe them out single-handed.

He knew that Steve Doust was probably the only man his brother Seth feared, and if the gang were to survive they would have to hunt him down until they found him and put him out of the way for good. He spurred the horse on to even greater effort for he felt that every minute counted.

It was probably the fastest time anyone had ever made on the journey from the Boyne Valley into El Monato, and both horse and rider were sweating freely as the animal came to a slithering stop in front of the big luxurious house of Seth Bronson.

Failing to find his brother at home, he tried first the bank, then the Marshal's office, which he found locked up and deserted, and then finally the Shiny Dollar. There were only a few men in the saloon at such an hour and the sight of Mitch Bronson rushing into the saloon, obviously in a very excited state, focused everyone's attention on him.

Mitch, however, was too agitated to notice the interest being taken in him as he sighted Seth and Boyd Blake at the bar and hurried across to them. Seth put down his glass and frowned.

"Where in blazes have you been?" he demanded. "I expected you back last night."

"Somethin's wrong," said Blake. "What's the matter, Mitch?"

"You bet somethin's wrong," growled Mitch. "Plenty!"

"Keep your voice down," snapped Seth. "What happened?"

Mitch lowered his voice a little, and Sam Kessop found it necessary to move unobtrusively a shade closer in order to catch snatches of the conversation. The barkeep kept at a safe distance and none of the three noticed his manoeuver.

"You're so danged smart," said Mitch. "It's a wonder you don't know. You seen the Marshal this mornin'?"

Blake looked sharply at Seth. "We've noticed he ain't been about since early last night," he said.

"That ain't surprisin'," said Mitch. "Seein' he's lyin' over at the Wiman place with a slug in his brain."

"Jed Holliday dead?" asked Blake. "Who did it?"

"Who in blazes d'you think did it?" snapped Seth angrily. "I told you if we didn't get Doust he'd get us. How come you got away, Mitch?"

"I wasn't there," said Mitch. "I was at your shack. When I got back I found the Marshal lying dead in the house."

"What're you talkin' 'bout?" demanded Seth, going red in the face. "What in blazes were you doin' at...."

"THINGS went wrong right from the start," said Mitch, cutting Seth short. "First of all, when Cox an' I got to the Wiman place we found the girl was still alive. I took her to your shack to keep her outa the way."

"Just the stupid sort o' thing you would do," said Blake. "Why couldn't you jus' tie her up in the house an' go ahead with getting the cattle over to my place?"

"That would've been real

smart, wouldn't it?" growled Mitch. "Supposin' someone had come an' found her while we was away? I took her to the shack so she couldn't talk to anyone. I was gonna ask Seth what he wanted us to do with her, seein' he don't trust me to do anythin' without askin' him 'bout it first."

"Quit belly-achin'," snapped Seth. "What 'bout the Marshal? What was he doin' out there?"

"Danged if I know what he was doin' there," said Mitch. "I thought mebbe you'd know. Anyway, it looks like Doust came to the place while I was away an' surprised Cox an' the Marshal."

"Cox, too?" asked Seth quickly. "You mean Cox is dead, too?"

Mitch shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks like it," he said. "When I got back to the ranch the Marshal was dead an' Cox wasn't 'round anywhere. Looks like Doust got him, too. I figure the three of us might be next on the list. It don't matter 'bout Blake, but I reckon you an' me. . . ."

Blake cursed, but Seth interrupted him before he could say anything more. "You two better drop your differences until we settle things with Doust," he said. "Like I've told you half a dozen times, if we don't finish him he'll finish us. We gotta do somethin' an' we gotta do it quick."

"What, for instance?" asked Mitch.

"We're goin' out to the Wiman place," replied Seth calmly.

"Okay," said Blake quickly. "I'll see if I can get some o' my boys. I don't think there's any in town this mornin', though. We'll have to pick 'em up at the Double B."

"No," said Seth Bronson. "Don't do that. We'll do this job ourselves. If people see a whole crowd of us headin' outa town they'll get curious. Besides, there ain't many o' your boys know the full extent of our operations. The less they know the better."

"Anythin' you say," said Blake with a shrug, but he didn't seem very happy about the arrangements. With a job like this one in hand, he was a firm believer in safety in numbers.

"How d'you know we'll find Doust at the Wiman place?" asked Mitch.

"Where else d'you reckon we oughta look?" asked Seth savagely. "You know what he's after, don't you? He must know the Wiman girl is still alive. He'll hang 'round the place until he finds her. He'll turn up there sooner or later an' when he does he'll find the three of us there to welcome him. Get your hosses an' we'll meet up the end o' town in five minutes."

The others nodded and the three men strode out of the saloon.

As they passed out of sight through the doorway Sam Kessop put down the glass he had been wiping for the past ten minutes. There was a gleam in his eye as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He had not been able to catch all of the conversation, but he had heard enough to give him the gist of what had happened and what the Bronsons and Blake were up to.

He called to his assistant to come and take over the bar, then went through the house at the back of the saloon, got his horse from the yard and climbed into the saddle. In a few minutes he was heading for the Boyne Valley.

VIII

WHEN DAN COX regained consciousness he found that Steve had done a very good job of tying him up. His hands were tied together in front of him, with the rope around his body giving him just sufficient freedom to allow him to exercise a very limited control over the horse. His ankles were knotted together beneath the animal.

Steve Doust had waited patiently for the outlaw to regain his senses, but the moment he did so he was anxious that they should be on their way to the shack north of the town.

"Okay, Cox," he said. "Let's go! Don't get the idea that because it's night you can try any funny business. I know this part o' the country as well as anyone else, I guess, an' you won't want to take any wrong turnings."

"How d'you know I ain't

gonna lead you into a trap?" asked Cox with a sneer.

"You might try," agreed Steve, "but I doubt it. You know you'll get it first if anythin' happens."

It was a difficult journey in the darkness, but Steve felt that he had little to fear from the outlaw. He had, of course, taken the precaution of relieving Cox of his guns, and as an added safeguard he had tied a rope around the outlaw's waist and attached the other end to his own saddle-horn.

It meant that they could only travel at a comparatively slow pace, but there was little else Steve could do. It was already daylight by the time Cox called a halt and swung around in the saddle to look at Steve.

"That's the shack, Doust," he said.

"Okay," said Steve. "Keep goin'. When we get to the shack we'll dismount an' you can walk in front, jus' in case Bronson's still there."

The door was locked.

"Give him a call," Steve whispered.

There was no window in the side of the cabin from which they had approached, and Steve thought it unlikely that their arrival had been noticed by Bronson if he was still there.

"You in there, Mitch?" Cox called, but got no answer. "Reckon he's left by now."

"Then bust the door in," ordered Steve.

COX DID not like it, but with Steve covering him with both guns he was in no position to argue. He put his shoulder to the door a couple of times and finally it flew open. Steve was close up behind Cox as the outlaw entered the cabin.

"Steve!" gasped Marj.

Steve Doust was relieved to see that the girl appeared to be unharmed, although pale and tired-looking. He ordered Cox to untie her. It was a single roomed shack.

"Where's Bronson?" asked Steve.

"Gone back to the ranch," said Marj. "They're going to take our cattle."

Steve picked up the ropes which had been used to bind Marj, handed his guns to the

girl, then tied Cox up securely to a chair.

"You better come with me, Marj," he said, and led the way out of the cabin.

They mounted and set out at a steady gallop in the direction of the Boyne Valley and the Wiman ranch. Marj was obviously worn out, but she was courageous enough to accept Steve's instructions without a murmur.

"What are we going to do, Steve?" asked Marj.

"Depends on what we find back at the ranch," said Steve. "I've got a coupla scores to settle. Looks like this is as good a time as any to do it."

"What do you think we'll find at the ranch?" Marj asked.

"That's what I've been tryin' to figure out," said Steve. "When Bronson gets back he'll get a surprise. I reckon he'll go into town an' spread the news. If we get to the ranch first we oughta make out all right. If they get there first we might have trouble."

Little more was said for some time and they quickened their pace. Steve was troubled at having to bring the girl along, but he thought it better than leaving her at the cabin, even though Cox was tied up. If he guessed wrong, and the Bronson crowd went to the cabin instead of the ranch it was likely they would exact swift vengeance against Marj. While she was with him, even though they were riding into very real danger he would feel better about her.

When they arrived at the ranch Steve left the girl some distance from the house while he went to investigate. Not knowing whether anyone was there made his job risky, but it was a risk he had to take. He approached the house from the rear, where there was only one small window, thus minimizing the risk of his being fired on as he left the cover of some trees and ran across to the back door.

He moved cautiously through the house from room to room and found it just as it had been left the previous night, with the furniture in the kitchen overturned and the Marshal's body still on the floor.

He opened the front door

and signalled Marj that it was safe for her to come in.

"Hope there's not too many of 'em," said Steve, "but at least we've got the best position. We can see 'em comin' an' they won't even know whether we're here, after I put the hosses away in the stable."

HE LOST no time in putting the horses away, confident that they were the only thing that could have shown that there was anyone in the house, and was careful to leave both front and back door open as they had found them. Then they waited.

It was a long wait, with Steve spending most of his time looking out the front window and Marj keeping a lookout from the small window in the kitchen. Marj asked for a gun, but Steve shook his head.

"Don't reckon you should have a gun," he said, and as he saw that she was going to argue, added, "I don't think there'll be a crowd of 'em. They'll wanta do this without attractin' too much attention. If I play it right I should be able to take care of 'em before they know what's happened."

Marj went back to her window and Steve Doust peered out towards the rise. As he looked he saw three horsemen come into view and halt their mounts at the top of the rise. Even from this distance he easily recognized the Bronson brothers and Boyd Blake, and was relieved to see that there did not appear to be any others with them.

It was possible, of course, that there were other men with the oulaw leaders, the gang having split up to approach the ranch-house, but Steve thought it unlikely. Seth Bronson was no fool and would not want to advertise what was happening at the Wiman place.

As the three horsemen began to descend towards the house, Steve called softly to Marj.

"There's three of 'em comin' Marj," he called. "You stay where you are until I call you again, an' let me know if you see anyone comin' in your direction."

Steve watched from the window as the three men dis-

mounted under the trees and stood talking for a few minutes. He moved back a little so as not to be seen. As they came toward the house at last, he resisted the temptation of taking a shot.

He wanted this to be the final showdown. He wanted once and for all to rid the territory of the outlaw gang which had terrorised its people for so long. If he took a shot now the best he could hope for was to get one, or even two, but that would still leave a third and in the confusion he might escape. Steve had no intention of allowing any of the three to escape the final reckoning.

AS THE THREE outlaws crossed the front porch, Steve Doust swung away from the window and seated himself on a chair facing the open doorway of the room. Probably when they had not been fired upon as they approached the house, they had taken it for granted that there was nobody inside.

Steve heard the tread of boots on the bare boards, soft enough to let him know that they were on the alert, although not really suspecting any danger.

Seth and Mitch Bronson appeared suddenly in the doorway, Mitch leading the way. He uttered an exclamation as he saw Steve sitting there calmly on the chair against the wall.

"Look out," yelled Mitch, and his hands shot towards his holsters. Seth tried to dodge back out of the room.

Mitch Bronson's hands had barely reached the handles of his guns before hot lead ripped into his heart, and a second slug from Steve's other forty-five zipped past his head to crease Seth's shoulder. Mitch

pitched forward on the floor and he was dead before he reached it.

Despite his shoulder wound Seth fired hurriedly at Steve and dodged back into the hallway. The slug missed its target and smashed the window behind the Texan. Steve was out of the chair in a flash and reached the doorway while the big man was still stumbling sideways.

Steve's two guns spoke together and Seth Bronson uttered a gurgling cry, threw back his head and slumped to the floor. Despite the breathless action of the last few seconds Steve was still thinking clearly, and realized that Boyd Blake was not about. A scream came from the back of the house and Steve ran towards the kitchen.

He stopped suddenly in the doorway. Marj was there, but Blake held the girl firmly by the wrist which was pulled behind her back and forced savagely up towards the back of her neck. The outlaw's other hand held a gun pointed at Steve.

"Out o' the way, Doust," he said. "Put away them guns an' let me get out o' the house. If you don't I'll plug the gal."

Marj's face was contorted with agony, but her courage had not left her. "Don't let him escape, Steve," she implored. "He's as bad as the others. Don't mind me. Get him!"

Steve holstered his guns and backed slowly out into the hall and Blake lost no time in following, his dark eyes glowering at the Texan. He backed out of the house and Steve stood at the doorway, powerless to act.

"Come right out o' the house, Doust, an' throw your guns on the ground well away from you," snarled Blake. "Nothin' funny now, or I'll plug this gal an' you too."

"Don't do it, Steve!" cried Marj. "He'll still kill you once you've thrown your guns..."

Her words were choked off as Blake jerked her suddenly back. Steve knew that what the girl had said was probably true, but he could not endanger her by trying to outsmart Blake. He tossed the guns down in front of him and watched helplessly as Blake continued to retreat towards

the trees. It was then that the unexpected happened.

"Don't like losin' a good customer," came a drawl from back of the trees, "but it jus' can't be helped."

Blake swung around involuntarily as Sam Kessop's voice cut through the silence like a knife. He let go his grip on the girl and shot wildly at Sam. Marj fell to the ground and Steve pounced on his guns.

Caught between the two men Blake's position was hopeless, but he whirled around again towards Steve. Steve fired from full-length on the ground and Blake took the slug in his chest. Sam returned the outlaw's shot at the same time and blood spurted from high in Blake's head. The gun fell from the outlaw's fingers and without a sound he toppled forward in the dust and lay still.

Marj Wiman was sobbing as Steve took her in his strong arms. He looked across her shoulder, intending to thank Sam.. He smiled faintly as all he saw was the back view of a lone horseman slowly plodding up the rise.

★

This was a dude to end all dudes — but they found that he was gun-poison. So an ambush-trap was set up for Lee Howell. Sarah would ask him out riding, in all innocence, and they'd be ready for him!

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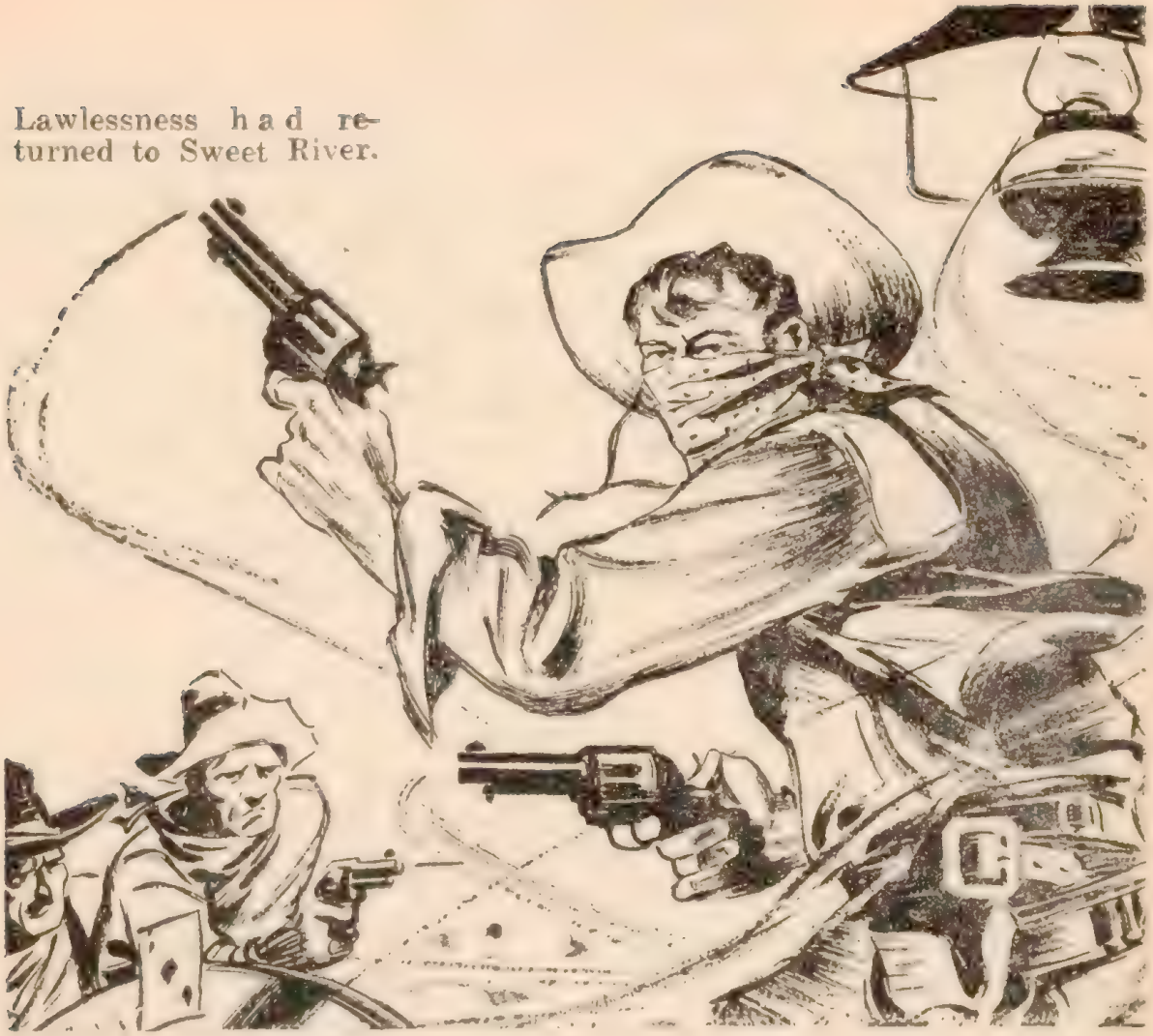
by F. A. Blackburn

Doran Baird had failed all along the line, and now they wanted him to resign. A boom was coming, and trouble would follow it. But Baird wouldn't throw down his badge without making one last attempt ...

DORAN BAIRD, old, tired—and a deputy sheriff where a lawman was scarcely needed, squinted against the sunlight which slanted through the window into his face. What he could see of old Sweet River—shabby plank walks; tilted porches tacked onto false fronts which reared over weathered frame and adobe buildings—seemed as barren and worthless as an entire life a man had just described so well in such few words. Then the leathery face lightened at the sight of a young woman who walked from the Sweet River Mercantile and started across the street toward his office.

But the bleak emptiness came again to the faded eyes back under their tufted eyebrows when he saw the quick smile with which she greeted a lean, nervous man midway in the street. He watched Loren Morse and his daughter where they stood and talked. Joyce Baird tossed back her head, laughed gaily and turned back toward the store with the man who had so recently probed the tender quick of her father's life with a rude, insensitive finger. The old deputy shut out the sight of her hap-



Lawlessness had returned to Sweet River.

piness the easy way. He closed his eyes. And with them closed, he re-lived the past few bitter moments.

When a man's pleasant world comes tumbling around his shoulders, there is a hurt he cannot keep from showing, no matter how hard he freezes his face. So Doran Baird had listened briefly to Hugo Glenn and then had arisen from his desk and turned his back on the men in his office. There were only three but they had seemed suddenly to become a crowd in the too-small, too-quiet room. The old man had pressed his lips together beneath his mustache as a controlled, helpless anger had throbbed through him.

"There isn't anything personal in this, Doran," the fat

man had placated smoothly. "We need a younger man enforcing the law. Somebody more..."

"Don't, Hugo," Baird said dully into the window. He lifted a hand to finger the badge which tugged lightly at the left side of his vest. They wanted that badge. "I ain't resignin'." He said it silently once to himself and then repeated it for the men behind him.

THEY LOOKED at each other. The youngest, lean, smooth-faced and with black, snapping eyes, tugged at the gloves he held in his hands and opened his mouth, but the fat man restrained him. The many years Hugo Glenn had successively operated the Sweet River Mercantile had left their brand on him. He moved and talked with the deliberate assurance his opinion would be sought and respected. He always dominated any group. Now his full cheeks wore an unusual flush. He allowed himself to use the only word in his vocabulary even remotely resembling a curse.

"Doran! This is your chance to resign. We write the sheriff, it'll be in the open," he warned for the second time. Then, when Doran Baird stood stiff and unbending, the fat storekeeper pointed out nobody was more pleased than Hugo Glenn when Tom Blue had selected Doran Baird to be his deputy in the Sweet River country. But now that the B. C. people had sent Loren Morse in and he had managed to re-locate the vein Antone Lisa had lost over in Socorro Wash ten years ago, things were changed, at least in the minds of Hugo Glenn and a few others.

Morse was polishing up a report in which he recommended his people not only re-open the mines they had acquired but that they ship in a mill. It was that big and it meant Sweet River would boom again. "Durn it!" Glenn exploded. "Everybody knows what'll happen then. You're all right with an ordinary drunken cowboy now and again, or to serve papers on some two-bit rancher, but you ain't man enough to handle a boom town!"

Doran Baird managed not

to flinch. He had known Hugo Glenn too long; he had worked for him that one time. He knew that Hugo meant well. The lean man who represented B. C. Mines, Ltd., opened his wiretrap mouth again but Hugo Glenn once more stilled his outbreak with a pudgy hand. Glenn nodded to the tall, deeply-tanned man with a graying General Grant beard and a distinct military manner who had been silently staring at Baird's unresponsive back.

"I just guess you won't look at it our way," he said patiently. "We've been friends too many years for me not to recognize the signs, Doran. You've got your stubborn neck stiff, good and proper. But be reasonable, man! There'll be men selling meat to the miners and they won't be too particular whose it is. I want to know we have a deputy sheriff who'll see to it that none of that meat wears my Crown F brand. That's my only interest."

DORAN BAIRD puffed out his cheeks and let the air slowly escape through his lips. With Major Eden Fields himself putting pressure on Sheriff Tom they just might be able to get this badge away from him. He felt his anger receding.

"Shore, Major. We been friends for years and years. Guess I was one of the first hands you ever hired on your Crown F after we fought them Johnny Rebs together. My boy Dean's a top hand for you now. But none of that gives you any right to ask me to quit before I've made a *try* at handlin' things!" He took a deep breath. "Ain't that right, Major—Hugo?"

The storekeeper and Major Fields exchanged harried glances but the man with them slammed his gloves on Baird's desk and swore. His face had been red but it whitened abruptly and his black eyes gleamed. "Look. When I write my people, I want to say there's a lawman here able to protect their investment and activities in the Wash. I'd be crazy to recommend they spend upwards of a million dollars here and then admit that the law in the Sweet River country is in the fumbling

hands of a man who has succeeded in messing up everything he ever tried to do!"

Major Fields laid a broad hand on the mining engineer's shoulder but Morse stepped from under it and closer to the indifferent back facing him. "I said you had failed at everything you ever tried, Baird," he repeated, spacing his words precisely and carefully. "What about it? Am I wrong?" The thin shoulders seemed as square but the face the men could not see had crumpled.

"We'd best go, Loren," Hugo Glenn muttered.

"What is this, Mister Glenn?" Morse asked. "Why do you try to cover for this old faker?" He glared again at Baird's back.

"You're strangely quiet, Mister Deputy. Well, I've been in the Sweet River country exactly five weeks but I learned all about you in one. Let's see ...seems you got a grubstake about thirty years ago and went prospecting off up in the Guadalupe Mountains—right in Socorro Wash, as a matter of fact. But you came dragging into town and announced there wasn't a single thing up there, especially in the Wash, just ten days before Antone Lisa made his Socorro strike that yielded rich ore for over twenty years.

"Then you became a rancher. Ah, yes. After you worked for the Major a short time, he fixed you up with a small spread of your very own. What was that brand you had? The XL. The XL! I understand you excelled mainly at trying to beat four deuces with a full house one night. Good-by, XL Ranch!"

THE WHIPLASH of words stopped and there was a brief silence. Then Morse laughed harshly. "Came the 'business venture'. Correct me if I'm wrong, Mister Deputy, but didn't Hugo Glenn hire you in his store just long enough for you to sweet-talk him into backing you in a saloon? I'm told the only thing you salvaged from that affair was an eternal thirst."

"That's enough, Morse!" Major Fields interrupted sharply.

"I'm sorry but that *isn't*

enough!" Morse's pale face flamed and his lips thinned. "This old faker has been able to get around you people for thirty years but that's all over. The people I represent are hard-headed businessmen, not sentimental softies. They don't give a damn that this man is a sorry spectacle, a man whose wife left him and ran off with a common horse-thief and whose children supported him since they were old enough to work until he became your sheriff's deputy. Well, his kids can support him again. He's their responsibility; not ours."

Loren Morse stopped abruptly. His breathing was labored. He grabbed at his gloves and stalked from the office. "I'll be at the store, Mister Glenn. I'll wait there to finish my report."

His headlong departure had not relieved the pressure in the room which was crowded now with a smothering silence in which Morse's words still echoed. Doran Baird opened his eyes and surveyed the street. Only a dog trotted off-center down its length. Joyce Baird and the mining engineer were still in the store. Then he turned slowly and looked at the two men remaining beyond his desk. They both were staring at the floor. Doran Baird rubbed his nose and studied them.

"Whew," he said softly. "That shore was somethin'. What hurts is that I couldn't call that self-righteous yahoo a liar. Now, *we* all know I ain't too much—but it comes as a real surprise to hear it from a stranger."

Hugo Glenn's massive head snapped up. "He never got any of that from me."

BAIRD BENIGNLY contemplated the flustered storekeeper. "Ain't important, Hugo, where he got it. Fact is, I ain't no howlin' success but I ain't a lot different than lots of other men. Some of us just can't seem to get rackin'. We try hard. Reckon we give up too easy? Or we're in too big a hurry? Whatever the reason, I ain't blamin' it on hard luck. It's somethin' in me, somethin' I ain't too proud of. But I am proud of Joyce and Dean. I've wanted them to be proud of

me. Always I've wanted that. Since I been deputy, they have been proud. If you two had come to me alone and let me quit with just a little pride left and not because some stranger to our country was cracking a big whip around, well, you'd left with my badge in your pocket."

His pale eyes brightened and his voice sharpened. "You're shore right, Major. I got my stubborn neck stiff good and proper. I'm thinkin' Sheriff Tom will side me till it's clear I can't handle this end of the county. *Then* I'll resign, but not until. You'd better not keep your young friend waitin' over in the store. You'd better trot right after him and tell him I'm stickin' and to put it in his report that way!"

Hugo Glenn seemed less sure of himself when he turned and left the room without speaking. The bearded rancher followed him but stopped just inside the door and met Baird's eyes. "I'm not too proud of my part in this, Doran. I'll see you get your chance."

When he was alone, Doran Baird leaned over his desk, his flattened palms supporting his weight. Then he slumped into his chair. He dragged open a deep drawer and lifted a half-filled bottle. He drank from it until the familiar sound of quick footsteps on the board-walk outside was the signal to put the cork in place and to return the bottle to its regular place.

JOYCE BAIRD walked through the door and her father's face twisted into an automatic, glad smile. She beamed at him and the feelings these two people had for each other created a live, vital current in the room. The girl was fair to the point of seeming to radiate a glow. Her blonde hair was so fine and light it appeared to be a halo surrounding her delicate face with its fine features and calm, deep brown eyes. Her full, gently curved lips were never far from a wide smile. Happiness seemed to be her own personal property but a possession she was more than willing to share with everybody. Now she stepped around her father's desk and stood behind him.

She tossed his Stetson onto his desk and leaned over to press her cheek against his thinning hair. He reached up, grasped one of her hands that was rubbing his cheek and pressed it firmly. This was a game they had played since she had had to balance on the tips of her toes to lay her cheek on his head.

"You ain't forgot Dean's comin' in for supper tonight?"

"No. I remembered." She paused and then added hesitantly. "I asked Loren Morse to come, too."

"He comin'?"

"I don't know. He told me it was up to you. What did he mean?"

The old man held onto his daughter's hand and breathed deeply. "A small delegation of Sweet River's leadin' citizens just left me, angel. Loren Morse was chairman, sort of. Hugo and Dean's boss was with him. They asked me to quit. Accordin' to Morse, I won't be up to handlin' this job once the Wash opens again."

The girl was silent while she twisted a few of her father's graying hairs around her finger. "Would it be hard for you to give this up? Loren just told me things might get bad." She stopped. "You're hurting my hand, Dad."

"Sorry." He released her hand and stood up, retrieving his hat. "Joyce, I'll tell you what I told them; then I don't want to hear no more about it. I'm stickin' with this badge till I know for shore I can't handle the job!"

She looked gravely into her father's serious face. For a long moment, neither expression changed. Then Joyce Baird's bright stare softened; a more characteristic smile melted her features. "I guess I won't set a place for a certain mining engineer, then. I must go start supper. Don't *you* forget Dean's coming."

LOREN MORSE ate a tasteless supper alone at the hotel but he also finished and mailed a long report to his employers. While a portion of it was not exactly flattering with regard to a certain deputy, B. C. Mines, Ltd., began to pour its resources into Socorro Wash. Cow-pony and ranch-

rig roads became crowded around the clock. Shouts and curses of sweating teamsters mingled comfortably with the clouds of dust the wide wheels churned from the powdery ruts which snaked through Sweet River and into the Guadalupes. As the ruts deepened and the dust pall became a permanent cloud on the horizon, the mill in Socorro Wash took shape. And s l e e p y Sweet River stirred.

Within a month, unused buildings were being patched up and the raw lumber in new buildings became bright spots in an otherwise colorless scene. Two more saloons sprang into full-grown being with a roar. A second store began to take care of the business which even far-seeing Hugo Glenn could not handle. The storekeeper had been right. Sweet River was enjoying another boom.

He had been right, too, when he had predicted what would come with the boom. Barely two months after Doran Baird had turned his back on the men in his office and refused to resign, strangers outnumbered older residents two to one. Doran Baird noted and catalogued the increasing number of men who seemed never to work but spent their time in the saloons drinking and playing endless games of faro and poker. These men all owned quick, appraising eyes and perpetually whiskered cheeks. They laughed rarely and then only at somebody's expense. They affected different types of clothing—nothing elaborate or fancy—but each wore at least one well-tended six-shooter in a holster usually tied firmly to a leg.

THE BUSY town eyed these newcomers warily and then asked Doran Baird to move them on. When he wondered aloud on what grounds, there were huddles a l o n g Main Street, then a larger meeting and finally a letter was written to Tom Blue. The sheriff drove over from the county seat in a buggy and met first with a few men at Hugo Glenn's store. Then he closeted himself with Doran Baird. When Blue rode back to Rio Seco, the bright badge still tugged at Baird's vest but

Sheriff Tom had left a warning behind him. "I don't forgit my friends, Doran. Keep these here folks happy and the job's yores. Just remember, these here folks're taxpayers."

And voters! Doran Baird had thought but he had remained quiet, glad to have a chance to hold, even precariously, to a bit of dignity.

Then it happened. On a sultry evening after several oppressive days had drawn nerves to a shivery, trigger edge, two of Major Fields' punchers rode into town and for some reason wandered into McBride's Saloon which was one of the new saloons and the hangout for the cold-eyed hardcases. An exchange of words led to a deadlier exchange. When the smoke cleared away, a gunhawk named Monte Painter stood over one puncher who had a bullet through his shoulder and another, Ad Kinsman, who had a bullet through his heart.

Doran Baird hurried to McBride's where Monte Painter grinned mockingly and handed over his six-shooter. There were sixteen witnesses, including McBride, who would swear on sixteen Bibles that both of the Crown F punchers had been looking for trouble, had picked the fight and had started for their guns before Monte Painter had drawn. Baird saw the futility of holding the gunman. "You pick up your gun in my office tomorrow, Painter," he said. "But don't crowd your luck. That goes for the bunch of you." He pushed through the swing doors after the men who were carrying Ad Kinsman's body away. Try as he might, the laugh that followed behind him could not be ignored and it stayed with him all the way home where Joyce was waiting.

"IS THIS the start of it?" He shook his head and walked past her. "Nope. Not if the Major'll just keep his men from goin' into places like McBride's."

The blonde girl's eyes were troubled as she stared at her father's back. "I hope you're right. But couldn't this start trouble between the Crown F and these men?" When her father did not respond, she add-

ed a little sharply, "Don't forget. Dean will ride with the Crown F!"

Doran Baird whirled to face his daughter. His face was stiff and his pale eyes snapped. "I ain't forgettin' it! But it ain't my job to ride herd on Crown F. If they're told to step light for a while, the Major's got to tell them." He walked to a small cabinet and lifted out a bottle and a glass. "He'd damn well better tell them, too," he added grimly under his breath.

The day following the shooting in McBride's, another delegation gathered in Doran Baird's office. After a wordy half hour, the flushed men stalked out. Major Eden Fields stopped just inside as he had on another occasion. "Doran, you're being a stubborn old fool," he said. "I respected your pride once but I owe something to my men." He stepped back to Baird's desk and leaned on it with the flattened palms of his hands. "One man's pride isn't as important as the lives of God knows how many people. I'm pleading with you to hand over your badge. If you won't, think of Dean!"

"That's exactly who I'm thinkin' of," Doran Baird said, staring into the cattleman's strained, bearded face. "This once, Dean and Joyce are goin' to see me finish somethin' I've started. You tell your men to walk around these jaspers till this blows over. The Monte Painters come to a town until the boom wears off and then drift on to a newer place. You know that. Tell your men to take it easy."

The Major's voice trembled. "It's hard to ask them to forget that a good man like Ad Kinsman is six feet under the ground. I'm not sure I want them to forget it!"

DORAN BAIRD jerked to his feet. "It's all right to ask *me* to make a sacrifice but it sort of goes again the grain when it comes to *you* losin' face! You got to be bloodthirsty just because you figure it's expected of you. Any trouble between your men and Painter's could be on your head. Don't forget it!"

When Doran Baird told his

daughter the killing of Ad Kinsman would not be the start of trouble in the Sweet River country, he was wrong. Two days after the shooting, B. C. Mines announced the formation of a police force under Loren Morse. Doran Baird did not comment, because the days when the people of Sweet River and the Sweet River country listened to him were past. He walked the busy streets alone; he rode the hills without bothering to stop at the isolated ranches. But he showed no outward concern over the lone game he was playing and, except for rare moments of bitterness, he felt none because he had developed a habit of thinking about the strange tricks Fate can play to shape a man's life and of wondering about the supposedly unimportant moments which so often are the framework of a man's brief span of years. He was quietly astonished by the extremely thin margin which exists between success and failure. His own glaring faults were as unpardonable in his own mind as they were apparent. As the days passed, Doran Baird's resolve to keep his badge and see one job through to the end became an obsession. So when Dean Baird rode in from the Crown F, his father was ready for him.

THEIR MEETING began on a sour note and went from bad to worse. Later, Doran Baird admitted, to himself, it was his own fault. But from the moment he saw Dean throw his leg over the back of the Crown F sorrel, a strange surge of anger pounded through him. When Dean reached the house, Doran Baird stood in the open door.

"So the Major finally got around to sendin' *you*. You can just light out and tell him my answer to you is the same as to him!"

Dean Baird, a raw-boned youngster not yet filled out and with bony wrists exposed below his too-short shirt sleeves, stopped. "He don't even know where I'm at." Then he brushed past his father into the house. With all his coltish build, Dean Baird moved with a smooth grace but his father watched him with-

out the usual glow of pride he felt. He stalked into the house after him.

"You're here to ask me to quit!" he shouted.

Dean glanced at his sister. Exasperation flashed across his face and he turned to face his father. "All right. If that's what you want to hear, that's what I'll say. And I believe it. Quit. Turn in your badge before something happens that'll make you sorry the rest of your life." He stepped closer and grabbed his father's shoulders in his big hands. "Me and Joyce know what's bothering you but you don't have to hang onto this job. We're proud of you, no matter what."

Doran Baird peered into the frank eyes. His gaze shifted to Joyce's face. "It ain't that simple," he said quietly. "It ain't enough for you to be proud of me. *I* got to be proud of me, too. You know that, don't you Joyce?" The girl nodded her head soberly. Baird brought his intent gaze back to his son's face. "You understand, boy?"

Dean's hands fell from his father's shoulders. "Mebbe." He sighed. "But what I really understand is that people are saying what's true. There just ain't no use in trying to talk to a stuborn old man like you! There just ain't nothing for us to do out on the Crown F except to follow after the mining people. Organize our own law. You know who'll be responsible for what happens. How proud will *you* be of *you* then?"

He slapped his hat on his head and rushed out of the house. Both Doran and Joyce Baird heard the jingle of his spurs as he almost ran to where he had ground-tied his sorrel. Baird walked to the door and watched his son spur away. There was a sadness and a hurt in the eyes hidden back under the tangled eyebrows. And somewhere inside him the tiniest seed of doubt had been planted.

THAT WAS the note on which Doran Baird and his son parted. Two days later in the middle of a scorching afternoon a Crown F man rode into town on a sweat-lathered horse and gasped out a story

of a shooting on Crown F range. Five Crown F riders had surprised Monte Painter and seven of his cronies butchering some Crown F critters on the ranch's far east graze. It was a deadly meeting. Within moments, the green grass of Live Oak Valley had been stained a bright crimson. As quickly as it started, the thunder of heavy gunfire rolled up into the shimmering hills, leaving behind two of Monte Painter's boys twisted in grotesque death. And there in the sun-splashed valley, three Crown F riders were adding their blood to the land they had thought enough of to fight and die for. One of the stoically-dying men was Dean Baird.

News of the bloody battle cut through Sweet River like a hot knife through butter. Facts became confused in the hurried re-telling but one stood out clearly: young Dean Baird had been shot down by the gunslicks from McBride's Saloon. The word reached Doran Baird lounging in the livery stable. He straightened slowly; the color drained from his face leaving it a mottled, unhealthy gray. Then he walked with measured, even steps to his office, locked the door and pulled the faded green blind. Joyce ran across the street from the Sweet River Mercantile, her cheeks glistening with tears, but her pounding at the door and her cries received no response except one gruff command to go home. She sank to her knees and hovered there with her cheek pressed against the locked door until Loren Morse drove up with his buggy. Dully, she let him lead her into the street and assist her to a seat. It was a quiet trip until they neared the Baird home when Morse mumbled his condolences. She did not respond and he muttered, "That old fool must be a sorry man, indeed." Then she whirled on the buggy seat. Her angry eyes were suddenly dry.

"That will be enough! When you've learned the true measure of what makes a man fine and good and wonderful, then you can criticize such a man. But not until then."

ALL THAT humid afternoon an unwholesome

quiet lay over the town. People gathered in quiet-talking groups and then walked away. Most eyes watched the closed door behind which they knew a man was suffering. Daylight faded slowly. Townspeople bolted their evening meals and returned to watch, drawn against their wills, even. They were silent now. They stood alone as individuals. Before full darkness settled over the weathered buildings, most of the men who lived in Sweet River were standing along the street. With darkness, the huddled forms were lost in the shadows of the porches and buildings.

Finally, Doran Baird's office door swung open. A figure walked into the night on the board sidewalk with steady, measured steps. A sharp inhalation of breath was felt more than heard among the shadows when it became clear that Doran Baird was striding toward McBride's Saloon. When he angled across the street, a light from Hugo Glenn's store momentarily glinted on his face and the fascinated watchers noted the new sternness there. They saw the shadowed eyes glowing like twin pits of hellfire. Then the unnatural mask was in the shadows again. The even drum of bootheels stopped. Doran Baird had arrived in front of McBride's Saloon. He straightened to a thin stiffness and then he was inside. Five men were strung along the bar. Their heads were twisted toward him. He let his breath slide past his lips slowly.

"I was hopin' to find you here, Painter."

The man nearest the door stretched his mouth into a grin which never got more than barely started. "Where else? You a ripsnorting tinstar all of a sudden, Baird?" His voice was gently insolent.

Doran Baird looked tired but his voice was firm. "Nope. I'm just what I've always been." He stopped abruptly and considered. "That ain't exactly right, neither. Before I had a boy, a good one. Tonight I ain't got him. Reckon I have changed."

SOMETHING in the old man's voice wiped the

smiles from the faces of the watchful men. Monte Painter straightened and said, "That's too bad. We heard about Live Oak Valley."

"You're a liar, Painter," Baird said tonelessly. "You was there. But I ain't come to arrest you. I'm here to kill you and as many of your kind as I can before I'm stopped. I'm makin' my stand on this spot. I don't never plan on stirring from it alive. But sure as hell I'm takin' some of you on that long trip with me."

Monte Painter relaxed. "You're talking my language now, old man. You make one move toward that gun and you'll be dead before you clear leather. You ain't a gunfighter. You're a nice old lawman. Forget the whole thing; the boy's dead. I'm willing to buy you a drink and forget you called me a liar in front of my friends."

"Nope, I ain't a nice old lawman, not no more," Doran Baird said. "I don't feel nice and I left my badge over on my desk. If I was a lawman, I'd arrest you. I just want to kill you. It won't bring Dean back but it'll keep you from shootin' any more decent people." His voice thinned and back in their shadowed caverns his eyes gleamed fanatically. "In five seconds, I'm drawin', Painter. Make your first shot count or you're a dead man."

IT WAS NOT five seconds, because a feeling as unfamiliar as pity or remorse suddenly chilled Monte Painter. For the first time in his adult life he knew fear. Clearly he saw how much this man had loved the son who now lay dead. He realized that some stubborn spark in this grieving father would be intent on avenging that boy's death even after the old body was ripped apart with lead. So Painter's trained hand dipped toward the .45 Colt holstered on his leg. The six-shooter came up smoothly. His thumb had the hammer back and his finger was squeezing off a shot before Doran Baird's hand fisted around the but of his own Colt.

But Painter's shot was wild. Muscles had performed by practiced rote but the grim man standing before him had

tightened his nerves. He hurriedly snapped another shot at Baird who was leveling his six-shooter. Again Monte Painter's nerves betrayed him. His last lucid thought was a wild, ravening consternation which swept through him just as a slug ripped through his heart, erasing life, reason—fear.

The deafening roar of the three shots rocked the saloon but to Doran Baird they seemed more like distant echoes. For some reason, all motion seemed to be smoothly slow and mechanically perfect. Through heavy gunsmoke he saw the two men who had been standing next to Monte Painter dig for their six-shooters. Deliberately, he shifted his own Colt and his shot mingled with two others. He saw one of the men thrown against the bar and then he felt the heavy blow of a sledge hammer against his side. He was spun around and to one side but he marveled in a detached fashion at his own calmness as he straightened and leveled his six-shooter and triggered another shot. The third man went over backward, his upflung hand sending a futile shot at the ceiling.

DEATH'S own frightening stillness entered the saloon. The heavy thunder of the shots had half-stunned the bartender and the two remaining men. They stared with unbelieving eyes, their damp mouths slack-lipped, at the lifeless bodies sprawled on the floor. Slowly they lifted their gaze to the hunched figure still standing before them. Doran Baird's side was stained with a widening splash of red but his gun was unwavering and in his almost hidden eyes burned an awesome light.

"There's three cartridges left. There's three of you. What do you say?"

For a moment longer they stared. Then McBride behind the bar elevated his hands. The two gunmen cautiously unbuckled their gunbelts and let them drop to the floor. One of them muttered, "My Gawd, Mister Baird. That was awful!"

THE HOLSTERED guns falling to the floor seemed to be the signal the citizens of

Sweet River had been awaiting. The door swung open carefully and then men boiled into the room. As they read the macabre tableau, they looked wide-eyed at Doran Baird. In the forefront of the crowd, Hugo Glenn and Loren Morse surveyed the scene. Morse licked at his dry lips. It was he who first saw the blood staining Doran Baird's shirt and pants.

"You're hurt, Mister Baird."

"All right, I'm hurt. But somebody better take these friends of Painter's in tow. They should stand trial for rustlin' and—and for that Live Oak Valley trouble. You wanted somebody else to be the law; get somebody else to arrest them. I've quit."

Morse's glance faltered and before he could speak there was a flurry at the door. Joyce Baird's excited voice pierced the babble. Her small figure twisted through the crowd and she saw her father standing at bay, his Colt still in his hand. Her eyes shifted to the bodies on the floor and back to her father. Then she saw the blood.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, panic creeping into her voice. "Why are you all standing around? Won't somebody do something?" She threw herself into her father's arms. The feel of her softness against his body melted the tenseness which had kept him erect and Doran Baird slumped. His gun dropped to the floor from lifeless fingers and rough hands grabbed him as he folded. He felt himself being lifted and placed on a table.

LOREN MORSE himself ran for the doctor. But Doran Baird did not know it. He held grimly to the ragged edge of consciousness but was only aware of his daughter's face hovering over him. Her tears splashed on his face when she leaned lower to hear his whisper.

"I'm shore busted up over Dean. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't let the doc look at me. I tried to do somethin' and failed again. This time Dean's dead. Some men die doin' good; others die doin' bad. And some just die tryin' real hard to do either. I tried to go

out doin' good but I even failed at that. I know I'll live, if for no other reason than to be sorry about Dean the rest of my life."

Joyce brushed at her eyes and placed her hands across his lips. "Shush! The man who came from Live Oak Valley this afternoon was wrong. The Major sent another man and he got here just before I heard the shooting. Dean isn't dead. He's going to live, just like you." Her voice became a private whisper, proud and vital. "Doran Baird, you're the biggest success I know!"

Doran Baird closed his eyes and hazily considered the situation. Somehow Dean was alive and, odder yet, he, Doran Baird had bested and killed three gunslicks. As the faint smile grew beneath his mustache, his grip on consciousness slackened. He did not know he put his last dim thought into words. But Joyce heard it.

"Well, by dang! I finally finished a job."

Then the darkness came.

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THE BATTLE AT t a RANCH

True Fact Feature

by Marc Peterson

This wasn't just a fight between cowboys and rustlers — this was a real battle between an army of rustlers and another army of lawmen. And the rustlers had the badge-packers under siege at the TA ranch ...

IN THE spring of 1892, the big cattle owners of Johnson County, Wyoming, planned an invasion up through the Powder River country to wipe out the rustlers who, for several decades, had been stealing cattle from their herds. On April 6, fifty men—including 25 hired gunmen from Texas—pulled out of Casper bound north for Powder River country and Buffalo, the county seat of Johnson County. They knew the country to be infested with rustlers and they intended to hang or shoot them as they encountered them. Three supply wagons accompanied the expedition with a doctor, provisions, and enough ammunition to kill all the people in Wyoming.

Leader of this army was Major Frank Wolcott, a Kentuckian who had served as an officer on the Union side of the Civil War. He had come to Wyoming after the War and

promptly gone into the cattle business, laying hold of a sizable chunk of range and a big herd of cattle. He was a cocky little man—sharp, decisive, belligerent—and known to be absolutely fearless.

Most of the tens of thousands of cattle that spread out over the Wyoming ranges in the decades after the Civil War came up over the long trails from Texas. Many cowboys accompanied these drives, and after reaching their destination, were laid off. Most of them got new jobs with the big Wyoming outfits, and continued to rope and brand dogies as they had done at home. The range cattle industry continued to expand right up to the big freeze of '86 and '87. Never before had there been such a terrible winter, with 75% of all range cattle perishing in the howling blizzards, extreme low temperatures and record snowfall. Many cattle owners went to the wall that season, and plenty of cowboys were out of work.

Included in the layoff were Nick Ray and Nate Champion, top hands who knew nothing else but cattle punching. Determined to use their hard-won experience, they took up rustling for themselves. Ray leased the KC ranch on the Powder River, and Champion moved in with him, making the ranch the headquarters for their rustling activities. As more unemployed cowboys joined their partnership, Champion soon acquired the reputation of being the leader of this gang, which grew bolder in its activities as it increased in size.

AS WOLCOTT and party moved north out of Casper it was tough going across the plains. The ground was soft from melting snow, and the wagons frequently bogged down in the mire. They headed for the Tisdale ranch, on the south fork of Powder River, which belonged to two members of the party. The tired men reached the ranch at sundown of April 7. While resting here, a rider came in from the north. This was Mike Shonsey, foreman of the big ranch of the Western Union Beef Company. He had exciting news.

Two of the men on the invaders' "dead" list were staying at the KC ranch, 14 miles further north, on the middle fork of the Powder. These two men were Nick Ray and Nate Champion. The party rested at the ranch during the day of April 8 while the three supply wagons caught up with them. That night they set out again determined to kill the two men at the KC. Well before dawn, the invaders had moved in on the KC and taken up concealed positions in the brush around the cabin. Several men, including the Major, had stationed themselves in the barn.

When Nick Ray finally stepped out of the cabin to get firewood, he was met by a devastating blast of lead. He staggered and fell to the ground. As he struggled to his hands and knees another shot stretched him out flat. Immediately the door flew open and Champion sprang out firing into the brush. He caught up Ray and carried the dying man inside amid a hail of bullets, none of which struck him. He then barred the doors and windows and prepared for a siege.

The invaders kept up a constant fire all morning and into the afternoon, but were reluctant to rush the cabin, knowing of Champion's reputation as a deadshot. Finally, impatient to get at their man and be on their way, they were able to burn him out and shoot him down. But it was late afternoon, and much precious time had been lost; worse, they had been spotted and the alarm spread. Earlier in the siege Jack Flag and his son, also rustlers, had ridden past the cabin, been fired upon and pursued, but had managed to escape to the north. A forced march was made, but, about daybreak the next morning, after the party had traveled fifty miles toward Buffalo, a cowboy came tearing up to them:

"Turn back! Turn back! The whole damn town's ridin' out to get you!"

IMMEDIATELY, a council of war was held. The expedition decided to make for the TA Ranch, on Crazy Woman Creek, twelve miles south of Buffalo. Working feverishly, they soon had the place forti-

fied against the attack they knew was coming. Breastworks of logs were built on either side of the house, and loopholes cut in the walls. The place was impregnable against rifle attack, and the only thing that worried the invaders was the capture of their three supply wagons containing provisions, powder and other supplies.

Hardly had the invading party completed its defenses, when the T A Ranch was completely surrounded by infuriated residents of Johnson County, determined to avenge Nate Champion and Nick Ray. Cowboys, settlers, and citizens of Buffalo—in fact everyone who could get hold of a gun and a horse—flocked to the scene. Dust-covered men kept arriving, some of them having ridden 200 miles, so eager were they to kill the hated cattlemen and their hired guns from Texas. It wasn't long before there were nearly 400 men surrounding the ranch.

A squawman and settler by the name of "Arapahoe" Brown soon took charge. He had the attackers dig rifle pits in the surrounding hills, 400 yards away. From these pits a constant fire was maintained. To prevent a possible break for freedom, the horses were shot down in the corral. Brown soon realized that there were only two ways to dislodge the invaders—by direct assault or by cannon. The first would prove too costly, as the trapped men could mow down any attacking party as soon as they came into range.

Brown, a blacksmith by trade, built a crude cannon out of gaspipe. "Stand back!" he warned. "We're gonna fire 'er."

With a shattering roar, the cannon exploded. Wicked pieces of metal whistled over the prone men. Somewhat sheepishly, Brown dismissed his cannon ideas and turned to something else. He next built what he called a "go-devil." The running gears of the captured supply wagons were placed side by side, and to the rear of the wagons was lashed a breastwork of logs over six feet high. There was room behind this wall for forty men, while five more could propel the strange device forward.

The breastwork was provided with loopholes, and it was Brown's plan to move it to the house and destroy it by bombs made from the captured powder. While this "go-devil" was being built, some daring cowboys rode over to Fort McKinney, fifteen miles away, and actually tried to take a cannon.

FOR TWO DAYS, the siege had kept up, a constant fire being maintained on both sides. Such was the terrible intensity of both parties that the cattlemen did not think of asking for quarter, and the besiegers did not send in a request for surrender. It was to be a battle to the death. On the evening of the second day, Major Wolcott called a council of war.

"Men," he began, "there's no need for me to tell you what a bad spot we're in. We're gettin' low on water and ammo, and now they've got our wagons fixed so they can get close to the house. I know damn well they're gonna use the powder to blow or burn us outta here, and they'll get every one of us when we run out. There's only one thing to do—break out unexpectedly and hope to catch 'em off guard. Some of us ought to get through. Just before daylight tomorrow morning, we'll make the break. Check your gear carefully and write your wills. If anybody's got any better ideas, let's hear 'em now."

Nobody did. The men settled down to a long restless night, realizing that it was probably their last. Just as the first faint hint of dawn appeared in the eastern sky, Wolcott roused the men and began giving last-minute instructions. Suddenly the sharp, staccato notes of a bugle rent the early morning air.

"What the hell's that!" one of the men exclaimed.

A TEXAN rose up and pressed his eye to a loophole in the wall behind him. Faintly he made out a long line of horsemen trooping over the ridge and down into the ranch hollow. The clanking sabers gave him a clue to their identity. Finally he turned and spoke, his expression like that

of a man who's just heard his last-minute reprieve.

"Ah think we're saved. Ah think it's the U. S. Army."

He was right. It was the cavalry from nearby Fort McKinney. Unknown to the cattlemen, word of their desperate situation had been sent to Cheyenne from Buffalo, and soon Acting Governor Amos W. Barber was in telegraphic communication with President Harrison, urging that soldiers be sent from the Fort to rescue the invaders. About 2:00 A.M. in the morning of April 13, Colonel J. J. Van Horn had received orders to go to the rescue. Fortunately he had acted immediately and had gotten there just in time to prevent the ultimate showdown in which many men would have died. Major Wolcott and party were only too glad to surrender to Colonel Van Horn. They were taken as prisoners to Fort McKinney, and soon after to Fort Russell, near Cheyenne. In January, 1893, their trial began. As no witnesses could be found to appear against them, and since Johnson County was too broke to prosecute them, the case was dropped.

★

Tex Lonergan had never seen this girl before, but here she was fighting on his side, against her own brother. Because she was looking for the same man that Tex sought — the man, the mention of whose very name brought gunsmoke trouble!

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Greer's lobos had burned, murdered, and maimed — and now a little band of men had nothing left for vengeance. But their guns would speak for the silent who could only hope for justice ...

MATT KENDALL turned in his saddle and looked back into the night. The red glow from the fire was still visible at the far end of the valley. He set his teeth and headed front, each motion of the horse stabbing pain through his left arm. He had bandaged the wounded forearm and carried it crossed in front of him, the hand inside his belt. He knew the bullet had grazed the bone, but perhaps it wasn't broken. Anyway he was alive...

The two of his riders who had elected to stand and fight beside him, old Burns and young Wygant, were lying dead back there in the flickering glare of flames from Kendall's ranch-house. The other hands, the wise ones, had ridden away before it started.

Kendall had known trouble was coming. Jay Greer had warned him, but Kendall was always a man to stand up for his rights and the rights of others. He had heard of the ruthlessness of Jay Greer; he knew the odds would be great against him, but he hadn't been prepared for any such brutal

onslaught with guns and torches. Greer's men didn't even give Kendall a chance to speak... "You had your chance," Coke Cressy told him. "Get out now before you get hurt."

At the first smell of kerosene and the crackle of burning wood at the end of the bunkhouse, old Burns had thrown his gun and fired from the house porch. It had been home to old Burns, too...

THE VOLLEY from the raiders riddled door and windows, and young Wygant crumpled and hung over the rail, still shooting as he died. Burns and Matt Kendall kept up the fight from inside the house, until old Burns lurched back from his shattered window, sagged and knelt with his bald head on the table. Burns lifted his head and Kendall saw the bloody grin under the gray moustache. Red firelight was in the room then.

Burns said: "Go, Matt, while you can," and bowed his head again. And Kendall had gone, out the back way and into the waiting saddle, to flee his home in a hail of bullets, half-hoping that one might find his brain. That was one night when Kendall thanked God that he had no family, no wife and children.

There had been no pursuit. Greer's riders were having too much fun whooping it up around the blazing buildings. Burned deep in Kendall's mind were the faces he had seen in the red-glaring light. Coke Cressy's long gaunt face, hollow-cheeked, wolf-jawed, cruel... Laughing Rip Vance, handsome and graceful and devil-may-care... Lon Kravich with a face rough-hewn out of granite... Cobbler Shea, little, wizened monkey, the worst gunman of them all... Hominy Hager, a giant of a man, looking too big for any horse to carry... Dyke Mazur, slick and smooth and oily, snake-like...

There were others that Kendall didn't know, at least two of whom had fallen. Jay Greer's hired gunmen, the terror of Pico County.

Now, jogging slowly toward Fort Platte, there were feelings in Matt Kendall that had never been there before. His strong

square face was set and creased with bitter lines, his deep eyes brooded under the broad brow. He spoke aloud, deliberately: "I've never been a troublesome man, nor a vengeful man. I've gone my own way, worked hard and honest, asked nothing beyond my rights. I have lost times before, fair and in the open, and I never held the grudge. But this time is different, and this time, by God, they'll pay! Eye for eye, tooth for tooth—and more."

Matt Kendall shifted in the saddle and gripped the pain in his left arm. He knew there was no lawful way to get at Jay Greer, for Greer ran everything in Pico including the law.

THERE WAS nothing the man didn't have his clutches on. He owned ranches and banks, saloons and stores, mines in the mountains and water rights in the valleys. Matt Kendall had refused to yield when Jay Greer put pressure on him, so Kendall had been driven out. He wondered how many hundreds of similar cases there had been around Pico. There must be lots of men in the county who would lift a gun against Greer and his gang—if they dared.

To go against Greer, a man would have to turn outlaw; there was no other way. Kendall had always been law-abiding and square-dealing; it was part of his creed. But any man will turn if he's driven far enough, and Kendall had been driven too far. Law in Pico was a mockery, Greer's plaything. Then and there, Kendall made his decision: If he had to turn outlaw to get revenge on Jay Greer, he would do so, without hesitation or remorse.

The stars were fading as the sky grew brighter, and the mountains on the east were rimmed with light from the rising sun. A slight breeze riffled the trees along the river, and gray mists were over the water. A bend in the valley brought Kendall in sight of Fort Platte, looking unreal in the early dawning. On the low plateau outside of the town were the gray stone buildings and walls of Jay Greer's estate, and in that direction Kendall stared with hatred inside him, hard and bitter as chilled steel.

There must be other men, good men, in Pico, willing to step outside the law and rise against the tyranny of Jay Greer, who lived like a king in a palace, guarded by paid gun-fighters. Kendall had seen them in Fort Platte on Saturday nights, swaggering the streets, pushing men out of their way, eyeing the women. One night he had seen Basil Greer, the arrogant son of Jay, thrash a drunken cowhand for jostling him in the crowd. Even after the cowboy was beaten senseless young Basil Greer kept picking him up and knocking him down again... And Kendall had seen Gerta Greer, the daughter, with her high golden head and her scornful beauty, riding or walking like a young queen. For her, Matt Kendall had no pity either.

The road led close beside one walled boundary of the Greer place, and on the roadbank Kendall saw the body of a man, twisted and sprawled with arms flung wide. "Another murder," said Kendall as he dismounted awkwardly, favoring his wounded arm.

But this man still breathed. His face was smeared and clotted with blood, swollen and bruised into a dreadful mask. His shirt, slashed to tatters, showed the terribly welted back. The man stirred and moaned, broken lips drawn back from white teeth, and Kendall saw the deep cuts on forehead, cheeks and jaw. "Water," the man panted. "Water, please..." And a sob came from him.

Kendall brought the canteen and knelt by the ditch. The man drank thirstily, painfully, and then tried to open his blackened eyes to see. "Thanks," he said. "Best—drink—ever."

"Can you get up?" asked Kendall. "I'll ride you into town."

"Guess so," said the man, and groaned as he stirred his limbs. "If I still got—my arms and legs." With his good arm Matt Kendall helped him to his feet. He was a tall man, a head above the blocky Kendall. He said: "Never expected—to wake up—again." And he tried to smile.

"Greer?" asked Kendall, as

they moved slowly toward the horse.

"Yes—Greer."

"Why did they do this to you?"

"Because I fell in love—with a girl. And she—liked me, too."

"And the girl?"

"Greer's daughter." The man laughed, but it was more like a strangled sob.

"What happened?—If it's any of my business. You can talk to me. Greer's riders just burned my ranch, killed two of my men, and shot up this arm of mine."

"Another drink," the stranger said, and tilted the canteen. "I met her in the garden. Foolish, of course. They found us there. The old man, young Basil, and two others. The two held my arms. The old man and Basil took turns—slugging me. One of 'em had rings on—I guess. After they got sick of that—they used a quirt. They did a good job—all right."

"They're going to start paying for all these good jobs," said Kendall. "My name is Matt Kendall."

"I've been thinking the same way," the other said. "I'm Conrad."

The sun came up as they shook hands at the roadside, and Kendall knew he had found his first recruit.

II

CHIMNEY smoke was rising with the morning mists, storekeepers were sweeping off porches and sidewalks, saloons were being cleaned of last night's debris, and early travelers were already clopping through the gray-blue shadows of the streets. Matt Kendall turned in to the hitching rack in front of the Open Range Saloon and helped Conrad from the horse.

The place was empty save for the bartender, who was sweeping the floor with methodical gloom. Kendall said: "Hello, Riley. We need something to drink—and a doctor."

"Good morning, Matt," said Riley, and then he looked up at them. "Mother of God, I should say you do! The mark of the Beast is on you for fair." He peered closer. "And Con-

rad!—I couldn't tell it was you."

"I'm not sure myself," said Conrad, slumping down at a table and bowing his head on his arms. Kendall sat across from him and rested his aching arm on the wood. Riley went to send someone for the doctor, and returned quickly to bring a bottle and glasses.

"I'll take one with you, if you don't mind," Riley said, pouring the whiskey. He was a big rangy Irishman, lean of body, wide of shoulder, long of limb. His face was red and hardlined, his eyes were bright blue. Riley had a harsh and sombre look.

"How's your business, Riley?" asked Kendall.

"My business," Riley said, "is no more. I'm just a barkeeper again. Greer took over the place, Matt. I had to let it go, I couldn't buck against Greer. And I can't stand this much more. Fort Platte has a smell that I don't like, Matt."

CONRAD took two good drinks and lapsed back into unconsciousness. Kendall said: "Riley, what do you know about this boy?"

"Not much," said Riley. "But enough to know that he's all right, even if he did fall for the Princess Greer. A fine boy, Matt, and a good-looking lad he was, though I guess now his looks have been changed and permanently. Something of a drifter, Conrad, thirsty for life and excitement, a jolly lad and ready for fight or frolic, either one. I warned him, Matt, but he had to find out for himself. Which he did, from the looks of him, poor boy. Conrad is of good blood, a good family. A bartender can tell."

"Greer's riders burnt my place last night, Riley," Matt told him. "They shot Burns and Wygant down. I was lucky to get away myself. I'm a man that don't stand for things like that, Riley."

"The hate has been growing in me these months, Matt," the bartender said gravely. "A man can't endure it—and still be a man. Either I get out of here, or I die here, because help me God, I'll be killing some of Greer's killers one of these days. Early last evening they

was in here, boasting and bragging and drinking without paying. It was all I could do to hold back, Matt. Since Greer took over my place they treat me like a dog."

"There are three of us right here," Kendall said. "There are others like us all over Pico County. We've got to organize, Riley. One man, or even three men, can't do a thing against Greer. But if we get enough good men we can fight him, break him, ruin him. He's been dealing crooked cards too long, Riley."

"He has that," said Riley. "Too damn long altogether. But to get him out is a long bad job, Matt. It means fighting the law as well as Greer. Lots of men will die."

"Men are dying now," said Matt Kendall. "Let some of Greer's murderers die for a change. They've killed and broken enough innocent ones."

A heavy voice boomed out: "Riley, you lazy hound! Get to work and clean up this place. You're paid to work, not drink and palaver with the trade." A hulking man with a pig-face stood by the bar, glaring at the table. He roared again: "Wake up that drunk there, and throw him out!"

"That boy's hurt," Riley said calmly, and slowly got to his feet. "My boss," he told Kendall. Then: "Hoskins, I don't like the way you talk, I don't like your face, I don't like anything about you. And I'm done working here."

WITH A bellow the massive Hoskins charged forward, huge arms and hands outstretched. Riley moved in to meet him and Riley's long arms flashed like whips. The two blows smacked like one ringing sound. Hoskins stopped short, staggered back, and caught hold of a chair. He was swinging the chair up when Riley's hard-driving shoulder struck his belly. They landed ten feet back, sliding on Hoskins' shoulders, upsetting chairs and tables. Hoskins squirmed and kicked out with his boots, but Riley's steel fingers were clamped on that thick neck, and Riley hammered Hoskins' head on the floor.

Hoskins thrashed free in a

frenzy and his boots sent Riley over b a c k w a r d s. Hoskins hurled his bulk at the fallen man, but Riley brought up his knees, rolled swiftly, and threw Hoskins clear over his head. The jarring crash shook the building. Before Hoskins could recover Riley's left hand fastened on his throat, and Riley's right fist was bashing that pig-like face. Like a terrible piston Riley drove his right, until Hoskins was a limp mass of flesh. Blood poured from long slashes into Hoskins' bruised eyes, his nose was crushed flat, his mouth filled with broken teeth.

Riley dropped him into the filthy sweepings on the floor and Hoskins lay still there. Riley tore off his apron, buckled on a gunbelt, put on coat and hat, and filled his pockets with bottles from behind the bar. Riley's grin was surprising on his hard solemn face. "I'm with you, Matt," he said. "Let's get out of here. We'll meet the doc and go back to his house. This place won't be healthy after Hoskins comes to." As an after-thought Riley emptied the cash-drawer of money. "It's mine anyway, by rights," he explained.

They went out with Conrad half supported between them, and led Kendall's horse down the street toward the doctor's home. Matt Kendall had found his second man, and high plans were unfolding in his brain, making him forget the agony of his arm. Now they were three: Kendall, the rancher; Conrad, the drifter; Riley, the bartender.

NIGHT CAME over Fort Platte. Lavender shadows deepened to purple and then black. The moon tipped the mountain peaks with silver and bathed the valley in light. The stars hung low and clear.... Along Main Street the flares flickered over the restless throng of cowhands and miners, and the saloons were swarming full.

Three men lounged in a front room in the Imperial Hotel. Conrad, his face bathed and patched, was lying on the bed. He said nothing but his breathing was painful. Matt K e n d a l l, his left arm in a sling, sat by one window, and

Riley's long form slouched in an opposite chair. Bottles and glasses were on the table between them. From time to time Riley rolled cigarets for all three of them. Kendall and Riley laid a course for future action as they drank slowly and thoughtfully. Young Conrad listened and occasionally called for another drink.

"Of course we'll have to get out of here," Kendall said. "If they find out we're still in town they'll be after us. But I'm hoping we can pick up a few more men here before we leave. Platte must be full of men who'd like a crack at Greer's outfit."

"I've got two horses over in the corral," Riley said. "Conrad will ride one of them. We'll have to get him guns and a belt, too."

"We'll go out and look around," said Kendall. "If we keep to this end of town, away from the Open Range, we won't be likely to run into Greer's bunch."

Riley rolled another cigaret and placed it in Conrad's mouth. Kendall set a bottle and glass within reach of the bed. They left Conrad there, locked the door from the outside, and went downstairs. When they were gone a groan broke from Conrad's gashed lips, and he stirred with the pain that washed him from top to bottom.

IN THE Roundup Saloon, Kendall and Riley stood at the bar and sipped their liquor, eyes alert and watchful. Over in one corner a disturbance started, with men pushing back from a table to leave two facing each other there. One was a rider named Vermillion, who had recently left Greer's employ. The other was a stranger, very young and very drunk, with two guns low on his thighs. Kendall and Riley edged closer along the bar.

"If you're a Greer man," said the stranger, "you're a dead man, too." And he laughed a drunken laugh.

"I'm not a Greer man," Vermillion said. "I was, but I quit. I got no stomach for Greer's business, no use for him and his men."

III

THEY STOOD looking at each other. The stranger was slender, almost frail, and his face was white and fine, delicate. He was bareheaded and the lamplight was golden on his tousled head. His gray eyes held a wild light, a kind of madness. He was just a boy, but there was something deadly about him. Every man in the room felt it.... "That's Jimson!" somebody said under his breath. "Jimson. I know it's Jimson. I seen him before—in Nevada." Someone else laughed. "You're crazy, that ain't Jimson. That can't be Jimson. Jimson's a killer. This one's just a punk kid." But Riley's elbow nudged Matt Kendall and he said: "It's Jimson, all right. He's a bad one. They don't come any worse."

Jimson said: "I ought to give it to you anyway. You worked for Greer. That's enough."

"I made a mistake," Vermillion said. "I admit it. If you're against Greer I'm on your side, stranger. But if you want trouble now—I ain't backing down." Vermillion looked dark and tough beside the blond boy. Vermillion was hard and wiry, all steel-springs and leather, the best bronc rider in Pico County. Vermillion's black eyes flashed beneath the tousled black curls that fell on his forehead. In contrast Jimson looked pale and girlish.... Yet it was Vermillion whom Kendall felt sorry for.

Jimson swayed a little on his feet, raised a pint bottle and took a long swig. "You think I'm drunk, don't you?" Jimson said. "Well, you're right, I am. But drunk or not I'll have three slugs in you before you hit the floor. And you don't waste a bullet."

"You talk a good fight," Vermillion said. "Let's see how you shoot."

It was coming now.... But Kendall spoke sharply: "Wait a minute, you boys." They turned slowly and saw the gun in Kendall's hand. Riley slid over until he was almost behind Jimson. "This ain't your play, One-Arm," said Jimson. "Wait'll you're called on."

"I've got some business with

you two," Kendall said evenly. "I don't want you all shot up. Vermillion, you know me. Don't throw that gun."

Jimson took one step toward Kendall and his hand was moving fast. But Riley set himself and his lashing fist struck Jimson under the chin. Jimson was lifted straight, his legs folded, and he dropped forward. Riley caught him in his powerful arms before he hit the floor. Vermillion breathed a long deep breath and relaxed. Kendall said: "Vermillion, come on with us." The onlookers cleared a way for them and watched in awe and wonder as Riley walked out with the terrible Jimson slung over one shoulder, followed by Kendall and Vermillion.

THAT STRANGE conference lasted far into the gray morning. The room was dense with smoke and strewn with bottles, empty and full. Jimson came to, laughed about the incident below, shook hands all around, and proceeded to drink himself sober. Conrad sat up on the bed to have his say, and his eyes were curiously attracted to Jimson's fair face. Vermillion was quiet but resolute in his feeling against Jay Greer and all he represented, and Vermillion was of particular value because he had seen the Greer machine operate from the inside. Jimson stated no reasons but said that he was more than willing to gun Greer or any of Greer's riders. Matt Kendall, calm and deep and wise, was accepted as the leader without question. Riley said he'd be bouncer because that was his trade, and Jimson rubbed his jaw and grinned over his whisky glass.

Before dawn came a new and secret order existed in Pico County, and the members, all but one, slept in their first smoky council chamber. Conrad, the drifter, and Jimson, the gunman, occupied the bed. Riley, the barkeeper, and Vermillion, the cowpuncher, rolled up on the floor. Matt Kendall, the rancher, sat awake in a chair by the window, his left arm across his belt, his square rugged face masklike, his eyes staring ahead into the grim future.

FOR A WEEK they took it easy in Fort Platte, lying low, resting, buying necessary supplies and equipment. Kendall's arm healed rapidly, and with the resilience of youth Conrad recovered from his fearful beating but the scars were there for life. Jimson tapered off successfully from his long drunk. Jimson and Vermillion, delegated to do most of the trading in public, became close friends. Extra six-guns and rifles were bought, along with ammunition. They kept the guns uniform, Colt forty-fives and Winchester thirty-thirties, so that the shells could be used and interchanged without discrimination or confusion. Kendall thought of everything.

They now occupied two adjacent rooms in the Imperial, with an extra bed in the front room, which was the larger and served for Kendall, Conrad and Riley. The smaller side room was used by Jimson and Vermillion. Kendall had expected to gather more recruits during their stay, but none showed up. The men who would have joined up were not desirable. Kendall realized the importance of selecting his followers with infinite care and judgment. One weak character would ruin the whole game. For the nucleus of the band Kendall wanted one more outstanding man, making them six so that they could travel and work in pairs.

At nightfall, Vermillion was waiting outside a store for Jimson when he saw Basil Greer swaggering toward him, flanked by the giant Hominy Hagar and the stone-faced Lon Kravich with two others trailing behind them. Vermillion started to fade out of sight, but Basil Greer had seen him and his voice rang sharply.

"Vermillion! You still hanging around here? I thought we told you to get out of Platte and Pico County."

"I'm leaving right away soon," Vermillion told him.

"You should be gone before this," snarled Basil Greer. "Take hold of him, boys! He needs to get what Conrad got."

Hagar and Kravich clamped Vermillion's arms in an iron grip, and Basil Greer got ready to use his fists. Two other

Greer riders stood waiting and grinning. The boss' boy sure liked to cut them up with his ringed knuckles... Basil Greer swung once, Vermillion's head snapped back, and the blood spurted. But before that heavy fist could fall again a dark man, massive and wide with great long arms, burst through, spun Greer like a top, and struck him so hard that Greer's feet left the ground. Greer landed sitting down on the porch, his shoulders smashing the wall enough to rock the building. "Black Hobart, the miner," somebody said.

VERMILLION was struggling with Hagar and Kravich, and the two other followers pulled their guns on Black Hobart... But Jimson came out of the store like a slender flame, both guns out and roaring. The two riders were down in the dust before they could fire, and they were down to stay. Black Hobart had Basil Greer helpless by the throat, and Jimson's guns were on Hagar and Kravich. They released Vermillion and he drew his forty-five.

Hominy Hagar said: "You'll all die for this."

"Any time you like," said Jimson, slim and pale and girlish. "Take their guns, Vermillion."

Vermillion did so and turned his bleeding face to Basil Greer. "I ought to shoot you like the yellow hound you are. It'll come later. Come on, Black Hobart." Hobart threw Basil Greer aside like a sack of straw, and with guns in hand the three backed across the street.

Matt Kendall and Riley were on the steps of the Imperial Hotel. Kendall said: "This is bad. We didn't want it to break yet."

"Couldn't be helped." Vermillion said shortly. "It just happened. We've got our sixth man anyway. Meet Black Hobart, the miner."

"We've got to get out of here, and quick," Kendall said. "Hell will open wide in a minute. Vermillion, get the horses ready. Jimson and Hobart, stick here and keep your eyes open. Riley and I'll get the stuff out of the rooms. I don't know where Conrad is, the

young fool. Watch for him!..."

CONRAD was halfway across town. In the shadows of the bridge he stood with Gerta Greer, his lean scarred face averted from her pleading eyes and voice. The girl said: "Connie, believe me. I knew nothing, suspected nothing. It was a brutal thing, a cruel trap. I have lost all feeling for my father and brother since it happened. And I have heard lots of things about them I never knew before. Oh, Connie, your poor dear face!"

"Gerta, their blood is in you. That means we go different ways from here. I may kill them, Gerta. It's in me to do it. And if I don't—somebody will. And I'll be mixed in it."

"Oh, Conrad, Connie," the girl sobbed, bowing her fair head to his shoulder. "I can't let you go. There's nothing without you." Her fingers were desperate, urgent, clutching his arms. Firmly he freed himself.

"I'm going," Conrad told her gently, but he felt a great need to take her and hold her, forgetting all else. It was stronger than his will, stronger than hatred or revenge, and his arms were reaching out for her when the shooting broke out... Conrad said: "Probably it's started now, Gerta. Goodbye," and he was gone, running through the shadows, leaving her there with her aching loss and her hopeless tears.

Then in fury she raised her right hand and a gun was in it, and she aimed after Conrad. But the tears blurred her vision and there was no strength in her finger to pull the trigger. The gun-hand dropped limp and she bent to the wooden rail, wetting it with tears that wouldn't stop.

Conrad made his way swiftly through the back streets and alleys, racing for the hotel, the knowledge bitter in his brain that his friends were in trouble, fighting perhaps dead or dying already, while he was not there.

HE WAS half over the fence that separated him from the alley behind the Imperial Hotel when there came a fresh burst of firing and the pound of running feet. Conrad hung there, left elbow crooked over

the fence, gun ready in his right hand. The sound of running men drew nearer, and then Conrad saw two waiting figures crouched by the far corner of the hotel. They moved across a belt of light and he recognized Lon Kravich and Hominy Hagar, a hundred feet away. Conrad's shots drove them back out of sight, just as the rushing men swung by, Riley, Kendall, Jimson, and a stranger, heading for the corral.

Lon Kravich and Hominy Hagar stepped clear of shelter to open fire, and Conrad swung over the fence and dropped like a cat. Conrad took quick sure aim and Lon Kravich tripped and slid on his face, his gun silent. Big Hominy Hagar kept coming on and the boards behind Conrad splintered and cracked with his slugs. Jimson turned back, grinning wildly in the dim light, and his first bullet sent the giant Hagar lurching to the rear wall of the building. Jimson called in a clear voice: "Come on, Conrad," and Conrad fled after the rest of them.

Vermillion had the horses ready, an extra one saddled for Black Hobart, and the panting men flung themselves into the saddle and left the corral at a gallop, lead singing and whining after them. Fort Platte, swarming with excited men and acrid with powder-smoke, was rapidly left behind. A few scattered horsemen took up the chase, but were shortly discouraged by the accurate shots thrown back at them.

Behind the Imperial Hotel Lon Kravich lay dead with Conrad's bullet in his breast and his granite face buried in the dirt. Hominy Hagar was propped against the wall, badly wounded. And out front in the street the slick Dyke Mazur cursed over a crippled leg. On both sides of Main Street windows were shattered. Witnesses of the affray tried to out-talk one another. It was a momentous thing, the first outright resistance to the reign of Old Jay Greer.

Of the opposing faction Riley had a flesh wound in his thigh, and Black Hobart had a plugged shoulder.

So six riders fled into the night, hunted outlaws already

through no choice of their own, made outlaws through their hate for Jay Greer and the crying need for vengeance. From each one of them Jay Greer had taken something valued highly, something a man will not yield without a fight—or lose his self-respect too.

MATT KENDALL had lost his ranch, his home. Conrad had given up the only woman his wanderings led him to love. Riley had been robbed of his saloon, his business. Vermillion was fired from his job and blacklisted with ranches throughout Pico County. Black Hobart's mine and fortune had been stolen by Jay Greer. And Jimson did not say what his loss had been, but whatever it was it had been great enough to burn the boy into a gunman and killer.

These six rode off and lost themselves in the hills, leaving two dead and three wounded men behind them. Posses combed all Pico but found no trace of them. Black Hobart took them to a hideout deep in the mountains, cliff-guarded on all sides save for one steep and narrow pass. A stronghold that a handful of good men might hold against an army. There was running water, and they brought with them a substantial supply of provisions.

Here they came to rest and care for their wounds, and here they made barricades of rock and constructed a cabin of logs. Six men fused in the fires of hated, held together by bonds of revenge. And here Kendall, Riley and Black Hobart planned and plotted and held councils around the campfire, while the younger men, Conrad, Jimson and Vermillion, fretted at their inactivity. And Conrad still wondered where he had seen Jimson's face.

IV

A fortnight later things began to happen here and there about Pico County.

A band of masked men, superbly mounted and heavily armed, struck with the speed of lightning and disappeared as by some miracle, in a series of raids and holdups. On Cactus Flats a stage bearing a large

shipment of Greer money was stopped and robbed. In War Bonnet, one of Greer's richest banks was cleaned out completely. At Union City the prosperous general store owned by Greer was held up. In Flintville another Greer bank was looted, and on Oak Ridge another stagecoach lost a cargo of Greer gold.

At first there were but six of the raiders; later there were ten or a dozen, accounts varying. Always they worked together with amazing quickness and the precision of a machine. It was obvious that every job was carefully planned, and each man had his own assignment to carry out. And it could scarcely be accidental that every thrust was aimed at Jay Greer.

Greer himself claimed he could identify the first six without difficulty. Spectators said the leader was a stocky square-built man with a square jaw and a calm steady way about him—Matt Kendall. There was a lithe rangy fellow with a scarred face—Conrad. The lanky, long-limbed one, red-faced and blue-eyed—Riley. And a great black man, wide as a barn—Hobart. A quiet-acting rider who handled the horses, wiry and tough—Vermillion. The sixth one, slim and pale and almost like a girl, always with two guns—the notorious Jimson.

"Get those six," ordered Old Jay Greer, anger coloring his pompous iron-jawed face. "Dead or alive, I don't care. We know who they are. Find them. Such lawbreakers can't be left roaming loose in Pico County."

Extra guards were placed on the stages, and more gunmen were hired to hang around banks and stores and saloons owned by Greer. But the raiders ceased their activities at this time. And posses could not kill or capture men they couldn't locate at all.

In the mountain crevice the hoard of wealth had grown so that the men who shared it became uneasy and restless. The idle hours of hiding away were a strain on nerves and minds; a tension increased by the presence of all that money. The nights were long and moonlight played fantastic tricks on the rocky cliffs. Matt Kendall re-

fused to allow gambling in camp, knowing well enough that it would cause fighting. They had a supply of liquor, but Kendall doled it out conservatively, for that, too, would bring strife and bloodshed. There were no women, of course, so the men were shut away from all the pleasures their blood craved, and like any group of isolated humans they wore on one another's nerves. It was an impossible situation to keep for long, and Kendall knew it. But he wanted to strike directly at Jay Greer before they disbanded.

Conrad came to long for Gerta Greer until it seemed unbearable, and he was almost ready to desert friends and fortune to be with her again.

JIMSON was impatient to turn his guns loose on the Greers, Coke Cressy, Rip Vance, Cobbler Shea, and the rest. And his need for excitement heightened his thirst for whiskey.

With Riley it was a yearning for liquor, for he had the true Irishman's lust for it, which inaction brought forth.

Now that Black Hobart had money he wanted to get out and spend it, he wanted the things that money can buy, and this dampened his desire for revenge on Greer. Hobart had regained his lost fortune. No longer did he demand Greer's life for payment. "All this gold and us rotting away here," Hobart said.

And Vermillion, his share being beyond any wealth he had ever dreamed possible, was inclined to be of the same mind with Hobart. Vermillion wanted a ranch of his own to raise splendid horses on, and there was a certain girl who had promised to be his wife when he settled down and saved a little cash.

So the original six were divided among themselves. And the new members of the band made it all the more dangerous. Matt Kendall was afraid he had hoped too high, expected too much of his followers. Disintegration had started already, and his plans not half fulfilled.

The new men were rather a poor lot, Kendall discovered too late. The man who called himself Nevada was a bluffer

and faker, much bravado on the surface with nothing underneath. Toomey was too scatterbrained, flighty and undependable. Hickory Hixon, a good man in his day, was too old now for this sort of business. The tenth one, Skene, was yellow and had deserted after being slightly wounded in the skirmish at War Bonnet. Good riddance—if Skene kept his loose mouth shut.

Kendall decided to pull one more job and then strike straight at Greer. It would have been better to wait, but he dared wait no longer. It was necessary to move before an internal explosion ruined everything.

But word that they were to move into action was received in various and disturbing ways. Kendall watched the faces in the firelight. Some cheered, some sulked, and others were dead-faced at the news. Kendall thought perhaps he had waited too long after all.

JIMSON laughed and hummed as he cleaned his guns with loving care. Conrad was relieved to have the endless waiting over, and anywhere outside of that deep rift in the rocky cliffs was closer to Gerta Greer. Old Hickory Hixon said nothing and chewed his tobacco without changing expression. Nevada swaggered and boasted, but there was fear in his eyes. Toomey was silent and sullen, acting jumpy again.

Vermillion said: "But we got enough money. Enough for all of us. We don't need to go after more."

"That's right," agreed Black Hobart. "And money's no good to dead men, that I ever heard tell of."

Riley spoke carefully: "Whatever you men think, that ain't no way to talk. As long as we're here we got to stick together. And Matt Kendall's running the show."

"You're talking right, Riley," said Jimson, his young face hardening. "Any man that ain't with Kendall has got to face me."

The men shifted uneasily, avoided one another's eyes, kicked at the ground. Kendall wished then that he owned a tougher and more merciless nature. It took a ruthlessness like

Jay Greer's to control men. Kendall was cool and calm and reliable, but there was something gentle and lenient in him that defeated his purpose now. He felt strangely alone and lost among his comrades.

Kendall said simply: "We're riding tomorrow as I told you. It's too late for any one of us to back down. We've got to finish what we started. After that you can go your ways and I'll go mine."

In the morning Nevada said he was sick, and he looked it. Jimson stood over him, slender and cold and deadly. "Today I'd shoot a sick man like I'd shoot a horse with a broken leg. Get up!" And Nevada got up, his face sunken and yellow.

They were silent on that early ride toward Goshen. They were inside the bank before the clerks got settled down to work. The street was empty and deserted under Jimson's watchful eye. But Nevada, sitting his horse beside Jimson, spotted a man walking far down the other side, and before Jimson could stop him Nevada had raised his gun and fired. The man looked up surprised and turned to run. People were rushing into the street now. Jimson slashed his hand across Nevada's blanched face and yelled a warning to the men inside.

SHOTS WERE ringing before the raiders got outside and into the saddle. The bank window shattered to bits. Nevada wheeled his horse, the first to fly, but a man stepped out with a sawed-off shotgun. The blast lifted Nevada from the saddle, nearly torn in half, and hurled him into the dust like a bloody bundle of rage. Jumping his horse over Nevada, Jimson leaned out to spit at the body. . . They were on the outskirts of town when Hickory Hixon doubled forward, clutched his horse's mane, and fell in a slow dragging dust-cloud. Toomey was hit, too, but stuck in the saddle.

Their luck had changed, broken. They had played out their hand. Matt Kendall knew it; they all knew it. Toomey was suffering agony from the bullet in his shoulder blade, and he kept begging them to stop. Jimson snarled: "Leave

him behind." But Kendall shook his head. "We can't do that, Jim. We got to take him." They rode as long as Toomey could stand it, and then they sought shelter.

Kendall led them up a naked rock escarpment to a thick-forested ridge, where they threw together a hasty barrier of boulders and tree trunks. It was hot even in the shade of the pines, and their faces gleamed with sweat, their chests heaved with breathing. The moaning and wailing of Toomey was forever in their ears, a saw blade across their raw nerves.

"Two men gone, and not a penny," said Vermillion.

"Three," sobbed Toomey. "I'm—gone—too."

"Go like a man then," said Jimson, his boy's face a pitiless mask. "If you all go, I'll live to kill Jay Greer."

"Son, what have you got against Greer? It must be worse than all we hold against him, I think." Kendall was very grave.

Jimson's fine pale face was terrible to look at. "He ruined my mother—and killed her," he said quietly. "And my sister, God knows what he did with her."

"I'll be in on the kill with you, Jim," said Kendall.

"I'll string along, Jimmy," Conrad told him.

"And me too, boy, so help me Father," Riley added.

"Greer!" gasped the wounded Toomey. "Greer'll be the death of us—all of us. You wait —and see."

IT WAS AN hour later when they saw the posse beating the brush for them. It had seemed at least a week. Toomey was now delirious, raving. Jimson said: "Keep him still. He'll bring the whole country onto us." Over and over again Toomey moaned, "I can't, I can't stand it! O God, I can't—can't stand it!"

Vermillion stood up. "I'm leaving. No use in all of us getting killed. Toomey's as good as dead now." But Jimson's gun motioned Vermillion back to the ground. Black Hobart said: "You're all madmen. You're all crazy."

The pursuers were scouring the hills on the other side of

the valley. All at once Toomey rolled and writhed in a frenzy, heaved himself upright, and staggered forward. Jimson's gun was on him, but Kendall struck the gun down. Then long Riley moved, caught the wounded man and brought him back to shelter. Five minutes later Toomey was dead.

It was the original six that finally rode from that ridge, but they were different men than they had been two months before. They were no longer united. Each man rode alone.

But their objective was the one they had started with, and waited for—too long. Jay Greer's place outside of Fort Platte.

In the night they rode down from the dark-banked hills. Greer's place looked like a great walled castle, and beyond the moonlight made a silver scroll of the river. Below Greer's plateau were the lights of Fort Platte, where all this had begun, and where now it would end, God willing.

Vermillion led them in through a rear gate known only to Greer's men, and as they filed through like shadows Kendall's words were still in their ears... "And every man in there is a murderer, a thief, an enemy of the poor and the honest. Waste no bullets. Give and expect no mercy..."

KENDALL and Jimson made for the house itself, followed by Conrad. Vermillion and Hobart hung back to cover the bunkhouse. Riley took a half-way stand, ready to move in the direction he was most needed... Music came from tall lighted windows, and from the flower bushes they could look inside. Conrad caught his breath at the sight of Gerta's golden head over the piano, but it was Jimson, the gunman, who stiffened and stared and said: "Great God! Who's that girl?" Conrad told him it was Greer's daughter. Jimson shook his blond head, eyes dilated, mouth twitching... Then without a word Jimson slid around and entered the house.

Kendall had vanished somewhere. Conrad, mouth dry, throat tight, scalp crawling, crept around the end of the building, and met the lordly bulk of Jay Greer face-to-face

on the back lawn. Conrad saw the fear on his face and knew he was going to shout for his men. With a panther leap Conrad caught Greer's throat and threw him hard on the grass. There Conrad held him and smashed him left and right, left and right, until that big face was black and wet with blood, beaten into a pulpy mass. And Greer lay still beneath him.

Conrad rose and turned, to see Basil Greer coming at him with gun leveled, and as Conrad reached for his holster he knew that his own mercy had made him a dead man... But Matt Kendall stepped out of the shadows and fired. The slug knocked Basil Greer over backwards and he never moved again.

When Conrad swiveled for another look at Jay Greer, the huge frame was up on the knees now, steel glittered in the moonlight, and Conrad faced his second death... Then Jimson leaped from the back porch, guns blasting, and the broken hulk of Old Jay Greer tottered sideways and pitched under a hedge.

Conrad, his own guns finally out, followed Kendall and Jimson as they swept around to the front of the house again. Guns were blazing back and forth over by the bunkhouse, and they ran in that direction.

A MIGHTY form loomed up at the near end of the bunkhouse, and even as a bullet showered gravel over him Conrad knew it was Hominy Hagar. Conrad felt the heavy kick of both guns and saw Hominy Hagar, Greer's giant, turn his face to the wall and sag down, his great hands clawing at the stone. He saw Rip Vance's handsome face upturned to the moon.

Everybody had taken cover now. Greer's men were firing from the shelter of the bunkhouse. Conrad plunged through the door of the blacksmith shop as a bullet burned his cheek, and there he stumbled and fell over a man's body. It was Black Hobart, the miner, still living. Conrad dragged him to a safer spot. Black Hobart lifted his wide body and dark head. "They got me," he panted. "It's all right. My share—

you boys split. I never could—hang on to—money." And Black Hobart died.

Dyke Mazur, sleek and slippery as a weasel, sneaked from another outlying building to get behind the attackers, but Riley's long arm went up over the side of a wagon-body, and Riley's bullets sent Mazur skidding on one shoulder in the dirt.

Now reinforcements were coming to the aid of Greer's men, running fast from the front of the estate, and Mat Kendall's voice called the retreat. Conrad slipped around the side of the blacksmith and raced toward the rear gate. Jimson was just ahead of him. As they reached the wall Conrad heard the bullet strike Jimson, and Jimson stumble to his knees. Conrad lifted him, but Jimson wrenched away and braced himself in the gateway.

Jimson said: "I'm done, Connie. The lungs, boy. I know. Get out of here." And Jimson dropped Cobbler Shea as he spoke.

Conrad pulled at him and pleaded. Jimson shook his head, white-gold in the moonlight, and his face was young and fresh as a girl's now, a face Conrad knew... "Go on," Jimson said. "I'll hold 'em a little. But go! That girl in there—not Greer's daughter. My sister!—and she—loves you."

ANOTHER slug rocked Jimson's frail body and he slid to his knees again, but those two guns of his were steady and flaming. As Conrad swung into the saddle he saw Coke Cressy's wolf-face go dark with blood as Cressy pitched forward. And Jimson was still kneeling in the gateway, still shooting...

They were only four now, but their gun mission was done. And those four had a chance of escaping and remaining alive, thanks to Jimson. And if he lived, Conrad knew now, that there was Gerta for him.

They had won peace, Conrad felt, and the right to a new life.

And Matt Kendall thought: The road to revenge is hard and bitter, soaked with blood and clouded by death. But whatever people say of us, we have done a good thing tonight.

INJUN HUNTER

by Julius Elman

Indians had killed Old Barnaby's father, and Barnaby had made a vow . . .

OLD BARNABY removed his dusty Winchester rifle from its peg on the wall of his store and shuffled outside. A lone horse tied to the public hitching post whinnied plaintively as Barnaby sat down in the shade of the building. The old man felt inside his baggy, black coat for a lump of sugar, carried it to the animal across the street, then returned to the bench and vigorously began to clean his rifle.

As he wiped the gun's stock which was scarred on the under side with twenty-three notches, Barnaby noticed a group of buffalo hunters leaving the saloon and coming over to him. He recognized Johnny Ogg, Jim Rafferty, and Ron Smith who all quartered in Carson Springs during the off season and got food and clothes from him on credit until they make their kills in the late fall. They were all good boys who had fought in the Civil War and migrated West when the fighting was over just like hundreds of other adventure hunting men had done. The old man liked the boys,

but then he liked everyone almost.

"Hi, Pop," said Ogg, "What yuh cleaning yore gun for?"

"Injun huntin' oughta be good in the hills this week," replied Old Barnaby, pushing the white hair back from his forehead and brushing a fly off his straight, wrinkled nose. "I got th' feeling."

The buffalo hunters looked at each other and grinned.

"Pop," said Ron Smith pointing to the notches in the old man's gun handle. "have yuh really killed that many Indians by yoreself?"

"Yuh think," snorted Barnaby "thet I'd carve up my gun jest to be whittlin'?"

"No," said Ogg, "but some folks in town say yo're too soft-hearted to kill anything, let alone a man."

"Injuns," said Old Barnaby, "killed my Pa."

"Pop," Ogg said, "there's bound to be lots of Indians in the hills now after that peace treaty meeting at Medicine Creek. Maybe I oughta go along with you for safety."

"I've been able to take care of myself fer the past thirty-three years," scowled Barnaby, leaning his rifle against the building and picking up a dirty gray cat that hopped on the bench beside him.

"Come on, Pop," urged Ogg, grinning at his fellows, "I've always wanted to watch yuh hunt out an Indian. Why don't yuh take me along?"

Old Barnaby squinted at the buffalo hunter with his sharp blue eyes.

"Sure, Johnny," he said after a minute. "Meet me here in front of the store in the mornin' at six. I reckon I kin learn you somethin' about Injun killing."

OLD BARNABY beat the sun up by an hour the following morning in order to take care of several important duties. First, his extra horse went to the best livery stable in town. Next, he took his old coon dog to a friend's house so that he would be well fed during his absence. Finally, he deposited Mike, the dirty gray cat, in the arms of Mrs. Weatherby, a neighbor.

"I swan," said the sleepy lady, "don't tell me you're going looking for Indians again. Barnaby Clane."

"Yes, Ma'am, Johnny Ogg and me," replied Barnaby.

"I swan," repeated Mrs. Weatherby. "I don't see how a man as kind to everybody and everything can go out and shoot Indians."

"Injuns killed my Pa," Barnaby told her as he mounted his horse and rode off.

Johnny Ogg was waiting for Barnaby as he rode past his store, and together the two hunters headed out of Carson Springs, across the plains toward the distant hills, silver in the rising sun. Both men were armed for their purpose with revolvers, and rifles thrust in their saddle boots. The old man carried an outmoded Bowie knife slung around his neck, and Ogg was further burdened with a long Sharp's .50 rifle, the instinctive weapon of a buffalo hunter.

At mid-day the hunters came upon a small herd of buffalo grazing in the stubby, brown grass. Johnny Ogg halted, swung from his saddle to the ground, and raised his Sharp's .50.

"Pop," he said to his companion, "I'll bet you an Indian scalp I can get every one in the bunch before they stampede."

Old Barnaby leaned down from his saddle and placed his hand over the muzzle of Ogg's gun.

"What for, Johnny?" he asked. "We can't use their meat, and we've got no way to carry their skins."

"For sport," answered the buffalo hunter looking up at the old man.

"Killing buffalo like thet ain't sport; it's waste, Johnny," replied Barnaby. "Let's move on."

"You're a queer one, Pop," said Ogg climbing back into his saddle, "a mighty queer one. I can sure see why some people don't think yuh ever killed an Indian."

THEY CAMPED for the night on the plain and entered the Indian infested hills early the next morning. They rode through the forests of cottonwood and oak trees and pushed through thick tangles of withered brown hackberry bushes. Ogg noticed a gray-speckled wild turkey sitting on a high branch of a shimmering, silver cottonwood and raised

his rifle. The old man cleared his throat.

"Wild turkey is fine, Johnny," he said, "but we've already et breakfast."

"Okay, Pop," grinned Ogg, lowering his gun, "but I do get to shoot an Indian, don't I?"

"Nope," said Barnaby, "that's my job."

In less than an hour Old Barnaby drew up and pointed tc the tracks made by an unshod horse. "Maybe," he said, "we'll see an Injun before long."

They rode on through the brown hills and were entering a rocky section when Barnaby pointed to the charred black coals of a fire.

"He stayed there last night. We'll catch him before long."

The tracks of the unshod pony became more distinct as the hunters progressed up a steep rise. At the crest Old Barnaby laid his hand on Johnny Ogg's arm and pointed to a still figure in the ravine below. A large Indian, dressed in a brown buckskin shirt and a loin cloth, lay prone on the bank of a small stream, drinking.

"A Cheyenne," whispered Barnaby slipping from his horse to kneel on the ground. "Now watch."

He raised his Winchester and drew a steady bead on the Indian. Ogg knelt beside him.

"Can I get him like this?" Barnaby whispered.

"Can't miss, Pop," he said, "all yuh have to do is pull th' trigger."

With the hunter's verdict Barnaby calmly lowered his gun, withdrew his Bowie knife, and began to carve another notch into the stock of his gun.

"Hey," hissed Ogg. "You ain't supposed to cut a notch 'til you've killed him!"

"I just the same as killed him," replied Old Barnaby, continuing to notch the handle. "You said yourself that all I had to do was pull the trigger."

Barnaby looked at the red man below as he mounted his horse and rode into the forest.

"But yuh know, Johnny," he said. "I don't know if I ought tuh count him or not. I think thet's the same Injun I killed up here last year."

★

able cain's lynching

by A. A. BAKER

Big Cole Murrell had paid his debt to society, and Judge Able Cain was determined to protect him against the vengeance of bounty-hunters . . .

JUDGE ABLE CAIN stepped off the boardwalk in front of Buster Sharren's Saloon and headed for his barrel chair on the porch of the Apex Hotel. He was a rolling man in an open mackinaw that covered his bulky figure in a pair of striped, bib overalls. Tipping his battered top hat, Able dug thick fingers into the mane of black hair. He blew his breath against the brittle spring air. With a heavy miner's boot, he kicked at the hardened ruts in the street. Glancing up to the flat roof of the hotel, one story above the porch balcony, Able caught a glimpse of his mottled brown homing pigeon, Wild Bill.

Wild Bill was the size of a pullet, with a rapier for a beak. The pigeon waddled to the landing board of its coop and glared maliciously down at the grinning judge. Then his eyes went beyond the steaming roofs and saw the Sierras shouldering their bulk into the blue sky. Convinced that the winter was done, and spring had arrived. Judge Able Cain reached his chair and settled back to enjoy his morning nap.

Before tipping the hat rim over his bushy eyebrows, he took a last look around and saw Big Cole Murrell. Able held his breath; the watch held by its braided leather strap in his watch pocket, ticked against his breast bone. He timed Big Cole's strides, the shuffling steps that were as even as a metrenome; four ticks of the watch equaled one studied stride, then a clack as the peg leg strapped under the whipcord pants leg, struck the board and swung forward in a spurt to catch up with the good leg. A knot hole, the judge caught himself thinking, catching the ferrule of that artificial leg, could jerk Big Cole's neck plumb out of kilter.

ABLE, KNOWING the reason, felt a welling sympathy. It was the dogged tread of a man who had spent years in prison, his leg iron attached to the ankle of the man behind and before. The slump of Big Cole's shoulders, the downcast eyes, the set of the stubbled jaw with whiskers once a rich coffee brown but now spaced liberally with gray. Big Cole was an old man, Able realized. But only in body, for the heady flame of rashness that had once made this ex-bandit a terror of the western deserts, still flashed in the tilt of the massive head; in the depth of those deep set eyes that could stare a hole in a tempered anvil. The swing of the gunbelts, weighted with heavy Colts jutting out below the short denim jacket, the haft of the long knife; a heavy bladed bowie, bulged against the collar of the jacket. "Armed..." Able Cain muttered. "Armed like a border cutthroat..."

As though the unheard words reached across the street and struck his wary ears, Big Cole looked up and his eyes narrowed on the dormant figure of the judge.

ABLE TIPPED back his hat, met the glare and decided it was time to reach some sort of understanding with this newcomer who had recently invaded the mountain town of Apex. The judge rose and stepped firmly into the street, calling out to Big Cole.

"You got time to talk?"

"Depends— Friend." Big

Cole's voice was an insolent rasp. "You opened—you begin."

"Those guns," the judge began bluntly, "I don't like the idea. Who're you fixing to blast?" Able softened his challenge. "We haven't too many citizens, hate to lose even one—especially a prime, first-class blacksmith!"

Big Cole, weighing his words, stepped down off the walk and limped over to meet the judge. His head was up and Able met the flash of ebony eyes as he waited.

"These guns," answered Big Cole slowly, "is purely for self-protection."

"Afraid of somebody in Apex?" asked Able.

"Afraid?" It was as though the word was a strange bug that required minute examination.

"That's what I said," Able answered. "Who're you afraid of?"

"Nobody," grunted the ex-bandit, "an' maybe everybody. You carry a target on your chest for as many years as I have, an' maybe you'd understand."

"They took off that target," Able said. "They took it off when you served your time in Quentin. Why don't you take off those guns and settle down like a peaceful man?"

"Nobody's takin' these guns, Judge. Nobody. You understand?"

"Nope." Able lowered his retort to a whisper. "Because *I'm* taking those guns—and that knife hidden back of your neck..."

"You are?" The raspy voice rose to a growl. "Why?"

"Because," Able continued, "once I take those guns, you'll have nothing to fear. Understand? You give up those weapons and this court—*my* court—will guarantee to protect you against anything."

THE OLD gunfighter smiled. Blunt white teeth flashed in disbelief but Able thought he saw just a glint of hope in the eyes and he pressed his small advantage.

"Turn those guns loose to the court and walk the streets of Apex a free man..."

"I'm free... There's my shop." Proudly, Big Cole

pointed to his board shack with its false front painted, *Cole Murrell, Blacksmith. Tools Sharpened.* Big Cole's voice was steady. "Learned that trade at Quentin an' served my time. Don't owe the law a plugged copper!" Belligerently, he added, "An' you want these guns—you're gonna *have* to take them!"

Able moved close, pressed his massive chest against Big Cole, then in a deft action hooked broad hands into the gritty lapels of the denim jacket. Startled, Cole Murrell raised an arm to reach the knife but found it blocked by Able's forearm. Able jerked the jacket over Cole's shoulders and slid it down the arms until the elbows of the man were pinned. Able stepped back one pace and yanked the guns from their oiled holsters; jammed them into his mackinaw pockets and whirled Big Cole about and slipped the hide-out knife from its sheath.

Disarmed, his arms pinned by the jacket, Big Cole grimaced wryly. His lowered eyes stared into the flushed face of the judge.

ABLE FELT Big Cole's body slip away from him. A pang of remorse burned the judge's stomach, feeling that he had upset the one-legged man. He reached but his victim had landed heavily on the street. The good leg made a knee with the wooden leg braced on that knee; the metal ferrule pointed directly into Able's belly. He heard a click, as though someone had cocked a rifle. Able whirled, turning back to Big Cole but the fallen man had rolled over and was rising; the jacket still binding his elbows.

"Well," the victim's voice was glum, "you done it, didn't you, Judge?"

"I done it," mimicked the judge. He jerked the man's jacket away from the pinioned elbows and, still talking led the ex-bandit over to the hotel porch.

"And when I took your weapons, I gave you complete protection of the court. I've watched you these last months," Able continued heatedly, "and what you've done. You have a big garden in, more than you can eat. You've been

cooking and fixing for Blue Carlson since he broke his legs. You've a dollar in your hand for every down-and-out miner from the Bear River to the Rubicon. Quinn, up at the store, says you've staked a dozen river miners to a winter's grub and that you're fixing to bring in milk cows. You haven't an enemy in the Sierras—and a thousand friends. You don't need any guns, Cole."

BIG COLE was silent for long moments as he stared out at the peaks to the east. Finally, he spoke. "You ever hear of Chips Banko?"

"The man-hunter from Nevada?" asked the judge.

"The same. An' there's another man out there. Riley Marshall. You know him, Judge?"

"No," evaded Able. "But what have they to do with Apex?"

"Nothin' with *Apex,* Judge, but they got plenty to do with Big Cole Murrell. Riley Marshall owns half of Nevada—got a ranch that's twice the size of the devil's muck hole. He is *Judge* Riley Marshall and's got more money than the Mother Lode... And he's got Chips Banko. Marshall," Cole added simply, "has also got a reward of five thousand on Big Cole. Understand? Far as Chips Banko goes, Riley Marshall put his own target flat on my back—a five thousand dollar target that Banko's gonna practice on."

"But you served your time," growled Able Cain. Inwardly, he was concerned. Despite the wooden leg, Big Cole *had* cut a wide swath. His guns had blazed through the west. In mining camps and cattle wars, this aged man with the prison stamp, had become a legend by his smoking guns. Convicted of a gunfight-killing in the Southern Mines, Big Cole Murrell had faced a California jury and been sent away—but had that prison term wiped out the scores that men like Marshall had totaled against this gunfighter's head? Apparently not. Big Cole expected retaliation and even while seeking sanctuary in Apex, had kept his guns oiled and his powder dry in anticipation of the day those scores would be settled.

"Chips Banko," the judge offered lamely, "doesn't cut any ice this side of the Sierras."

"You're the judge," morosely answered Big Cole. "You took my guns an' maybe I ain't sorry. But, Judge," Big Cole smiled gently, "don't go an' get yourself killed. Maybe I ain't worth it." Cole rose, ran his aged hands forlornly over the empty holsters then, with his paced stride, walked away.

"WHYN'T YOU tell him the truth?" Able jerked erect at the words of Pike Peel who, stepping gingerly through the hotel doors, cradled a snub-nosed shotgun in skinny arms. He braced his spidery legs and glared down at the judge. "An' the next time," he complained, "anybody's to be disarmed—ain't that *my* job?" Pike was angry, his reedy voice nearing a shout. "You blocked his knife arm fine—'ceptin' if he'd been carryin' a sleeve gun he could'a blowed your belt buckle through your spine!"

"Well," Able's retort was feeble, "he wasn't carrying a sleeve gun."

"You sure, Judge?" Pike asked cryptically. He waved a hand. "None of that matters now. You should of told him that Chips Banko is coming."

"That's too nice an old man," objected the judge, "to have him fretting his life away. Believing the past is riding him down. Hiding from shadows. And," Able suddenly roared, "there isn't any Chips Banko—nor Judge Riley Marshall—going to bring his law all the way from Nevada and bother an unarmed Apex citizen!"

"They're comin'," Pike said flatly, "you got the letter sayin so. An' you got the reward post that come with the letter, didn't you? The poster showin' that Big Cole is worth five thousand dollars—dead or alive—armed or *unarmed!*"

"But he's served his time. He's settled in Apex and opened a blacksmith shop. Never hurt a single hair of a man's head here. And," again the judge's voice was a roar, "this is *my* domicile! This is my baliwick! In Apex, Able Cain is judge. Here, the law works both ways. It punishes the guilty and protects the—er—er—corrected. Yes, the cor-

rected—like Big Cole Murrell."

"BANKO DON'T care," Pike answered. "He's wantin' that five thousand. He'll lay up in the manzanita and plug Murrell in the back—or gunfight him in the street. An' can you hide Big Cole? That cork leg is a dead giveaway. Can you run Big Cole off till Banko's gone? That old man'd never move an *inch* outa Apex now—even if they was chargin' him with Custer's Cavalry!"

"But that reward," objected Able, "isn't legal now. That poster's ten years old..."

"Don't cut no water," shouted Pike, knowing he was right and realizing the judge was unsure of his own position. "An' another thing. Chips Banko is comin' as a law officer—with a star on his vest an' a Nevada judge to back him..."

Able groaned. "Then you do this. You get a stock of grub and a blanket and you camp on the pass. Don't let Banko over the summit! Turn him off and send him skedaddling back into Nevada with the rest of the jackrabbits and coyotes like this Judge Marshall."

"Them your orders, Judge?" Deputy Pike Peel was righteously outraged. "You settin' one law officer against another?"

"You *know* Banko's a paid man-hunter—a bounty killer!" snapped the judge. "He's coming to disturb the peace of Apex, to assault one of its law abiding citizens. A star doesn't give him that right!"

"You orderin', Judge?"

"I'm ordering, Pike!"

"AW RIGHT, Judge," the wizened face of Pike Peel grimaced in wry concern, "but just remember that if Banko gets by me—*he'll* be carryin' a sleeve gun or a gatling strapped under his shirt!"

"Don't worry, Pike." Able warmed under Pike's concern. The little gamecock wasn't a bit worried about a possible rifle duel with Chips Banko; but only about a friend's hide. "And Pike," admonished the judge with sincere concern, "don't get hurt."

Pike Peel grunted bruskly and calipered, his wisp of a

shadow like a walking clothes pin, across the street toward the livery stable.

"Pike!" Able shouted.

"Yeah?" The deputy turned.

"Take Wild Bill." The judge pointed to the cote on the roof.

"*That* man-eatin' squab?" blazed the deputy. "Last time out he spent fightin' coyotes! He don't think he's no homin' pigeon—he's a throwback fightin' cock hidin' in a pigeon's feathers."

"You take him," ordered the judge. "You send him back with a message if anything happens up there."

Grumpily, Pike Peel nodded, and the judge returned to his seat with vague misgivings. He had set a chain of events into being that could lead to disaster. He was about to challenge the authority of the Nevada courts; had ordered Pike Peel to turn back—by force if necessary—a law-officer of the Nevada Territory. But Chips Banko was a hired man-hunter crossing the mountains in search of Big Cole Murrell to collect a reward posted, in spite, by Riley Marshall. And what of Big Cole? Disarmed now and helpless unless Judge Able Cain could back up his boast that Apex could protect its own.

The week passed. Able watched Big Cole shaping bits on his anvil, the massively whiskered face bent intently over his work; raising the denim shoulders to stretch, to turn slowly and stare toward the mountains. Able watched for Pike's pigeon to circle down from the peaks. It was quiet, too damned quiet.

WHEN IT happened, when the gun shot fang out from the brush behind the Strawberry Hill Hydraulic Dam, the judge was asleep. He rolled out of bed, upending the wash stand in his frantic search for his colt. He reached the window as the second shot flared out and heard the yelling behind the blacksmith shop. Able fired one shot at the sniper, pranced out onto the porch; a furious avenger in red longjohns and bellowed.

"What's going on? Hold your fire!"

He saw the flare emitting from the rifle barrel and knew,

before the slug sang its way across the roof tops, that he was the target. He felt the jolt and knew his shoulder-bone was cracked even before he felt the pain. Reeling, eyes blurred blood red, Able braced his sickened frame against the clapboards of the hotel wall. Sliding downward, Able fought the pain and, with the relentless hate of the bushwhacked, swore vengeance. Swore that the man behind that rifle and the man responsible for the bushwhacker, would pay.

The yelling continued. It was Blue Larson who, like a damn fool and with his splints gleaming in the moonlight, staggered out into the street with a lantern. Other lights were appearing as men darted into the streets.

ABLE CAIN crawled to the railing and glared out. A squad of Nevada horsemen, yelling and firing Colts, charged down from the hill. They were herding the tousled citizens into a milling clump below the Clamper's Hall. As Able watched, a white hatted man on a skittish roan, dispatched a pair of men toward

[*Turn Page*]

★
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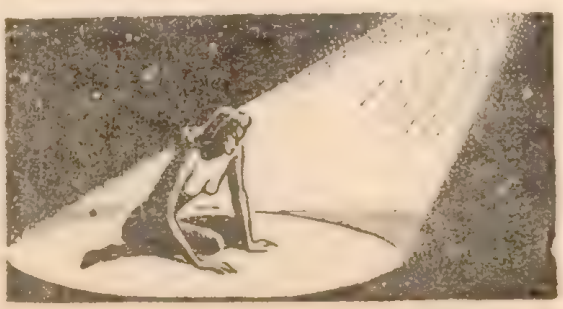
It was downright immoral, she thought. And what could an honest stripper do for a living in the future, where no one—but no one!—wore any clothes at all? Don't miss this hilarious tale of tomorrow.

The Bare Facts

by George H. Smith



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the hotel and another five into Big Cole's Blacksmith Shop. These last emerged with Blue Larson, who had belatedly returned for shelter, and half dragged the crippled man before the leader.

Ducking back into his room, Able slipped on his overalls, rammed his feet into his boots and scuttled up the back stairs. Staggering, each step a jolt against his wounded shoulder, Able slipped on the dew covered steps. Clumsily, he reached the roof and worked his good arm into the cote. Pike's pigeon had not returned. How had these devils gotten by his deputy? Even now Pike's corpse might be lying in a moon struck, snow filled gulley on the summit. But who, the judge cursed himself bitterly, would have expected a posse? The message from Nevada with its crumpled reward poster, had stated only that Chips Banko was coming into Apex after Big Cole Murrell. Well, the bounty hunter had arrived; but with an army at his back. And what of Big Cole? Able hadn't seen the ex-gunfighter in the street.

"The bird..." Behind him the words came like a curse. "Pike's pigeon never come, did it, Judge?"

"No." Turning, Able stared into the sunken, bitter face of Big Cole.

"THEN THEY got Pike, Judge!" blurted Cole, a hint of frustration bordering tears in his voice. "They got little ol' Pike!" He noticed the blood running down Able's sleeve and over his hand. "An' they plugged you, eh?" His voice snapped. "Bad, Judge?"

"No!" Able snapped back. "And don't get all weepy about it. Pike can take care of himself..."

"Then where's the pigeon?"

"Damn the pigeon!" The shock of the rifle wound was blurring Able's senses. He was slipping into a blackout and had to act fast. "Get me..." he leaned heavily against Big Cole. "Get me—back to my room..."

"Sure, Judge, sure."

Able felt himself hoisted onto Big Cole's shoulder and carried down the stairs and through the back hallway. He groaned thankfully as he felt his bed rise up to meet his suf-

fering body and focused his eyes to find Big Cole standing over him with a whiskey bottle. The liquor gurgled warmly over his chin and he trapped some in his mouth.

"Come outa it, Judge..."

"Yes—yes. Now, you get l o o s e—from here—beat it down to Auburn. Tell them—tell them Nevada's declared war on California. Send help—to Apex..." The black fog was rolling across Able's eyes as he fought to hold his senses. "There—in the bureau drawer—there's a badge. Pin it on..."

While Big Cole ransacked the drawer, Able sucked another pull from the bottle and half raised on his elbow, mumbling. "Under—authority vested in me—let it be known that Big Cole—is appointed Deputy of this Court—swear to—honor badge—u p h o l d the laws..."

"Judge!" Big Cole's voice

[*Turn Page*]

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was shaken. "They're comin' in the front..."

"And," hurriedly added Judge Cain, wanting so badly to let his senses slip, "when you've sent that Auburn posse up here—get up on the summit and find—Pike. And don't—you come back here or they'll..."

As Judge Cain blacked out, he heard the racing clump of the wooden leg as Big Cole pounded down the hallway.

JUDGE ABLE CAIN stirred alive. The sun was in his face as he opened coma-weighted eyes and peered through a blood shot haze. Armed strangers were gathered around him and he realized he had been carried from his room and plunked down on the ground in front of the Apex Hanging Tree. He was still in his red undershirt and his shoulder was atingle with needles of pain.

"He's come to, Riley..." A lean man in a cowskin winter jacket squatted down and the judge looked him over.

This man was Chips Banko. A cadavorous face, pock-marked under the sparse head

of blond hair topped by a grease-stained, coon-skin hat. The veined hands caressed a long-barreled sniper's rifle and Able blearily realized that this man had been behind the sights of the slug that had smashed out of the Strawberry Dam.

To the right of the man-hunter stood an oily faced lump of a man; Nevada's Judge Riley Marshall. A shoshone watchfob dangled from the paunchy belly and the stubby arms emerging from the brown duster were encased in a pair of Shoshone cuffs. His shirt was open, exposing a mat of chest hair deftly trimmed like a second collar.

RILEY MARSHALL was speaking in a ready voice that finally penetrated the judge's fog.

"An' that's all we come for, Judge. You understand? Jest loose your Big Cole Murrell an' we're long gone from Apex."

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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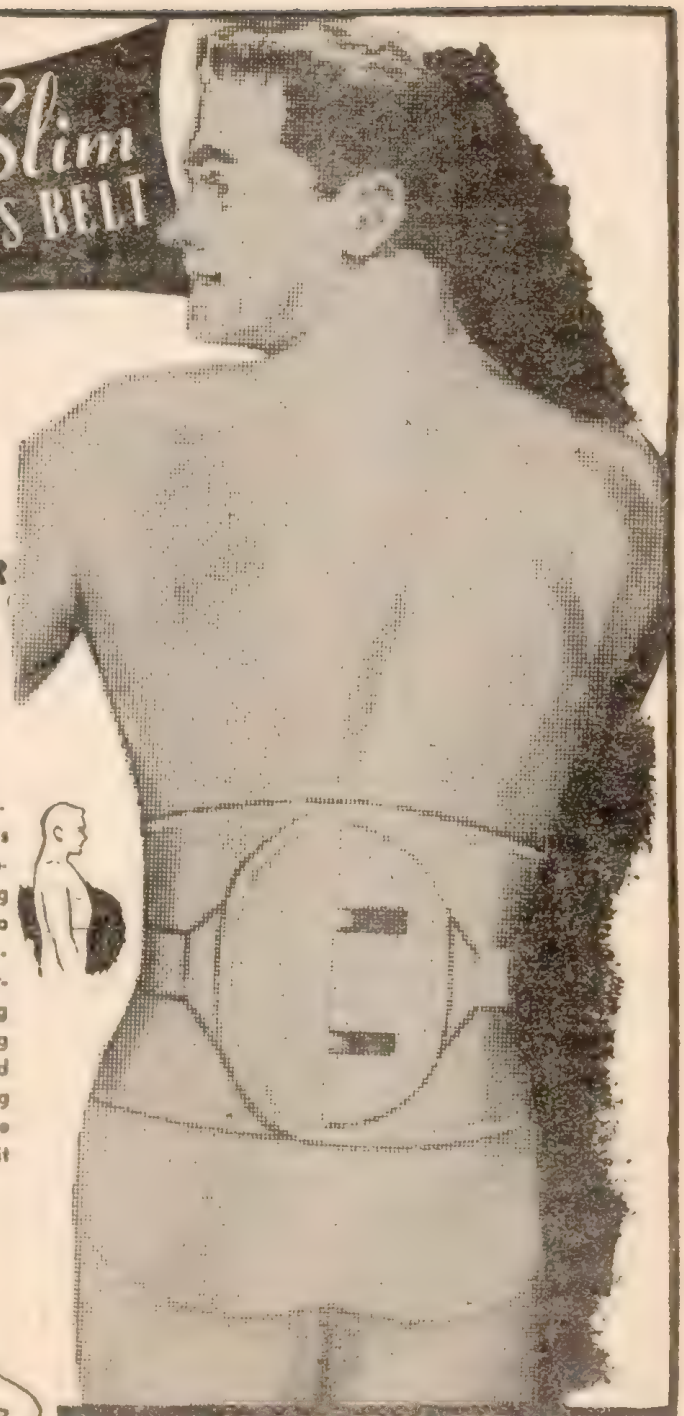

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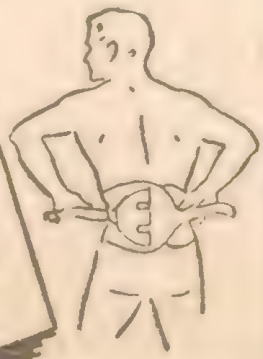

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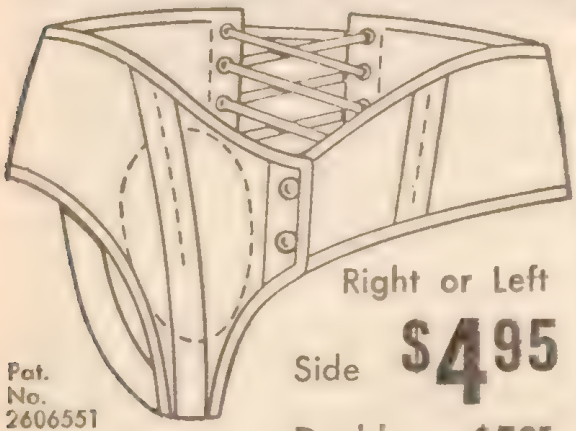

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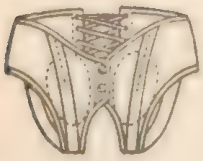

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Able managed to put snap in his reply. "Better git right now—or I'll loose Big Cole and Pike Peel! They'll run you so fast..."

"Don't bluff," growled Riley Marshall. "Your Pike ain't comin'... Show him!" Riley turned to a man behind him and snatched at a wheat sack. "In here's your carrier pigeon." He smacked the sack a vicious blow. "Now be sensible, Judge. We've got your town under control. We got you. We even got this fightin' bird from hell—so all's needed is what we came for—Big Cole Murrell."

"Then you came for nothing," retorted Able Cain.

"We can wait," Chips Banko broke in, "an' while waitin' we can burn your town. Jest make it easy on yourself an' tell us where at is Big Cole Murrell or..."

"Now, now," admonished Judge Marshall. "They's other ways of fixin' things. Couple of you men," Marshall whirled and snatched a braided rope from a saddle and flung it over a hanging limb. "Hoist this

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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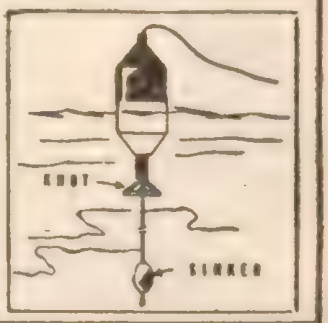

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frog mouthed judge a few feet off the ground. Stretch his gullet so's he can talk sense!"

Able felt the rope honda catch under his ear. He groaned as the rope tightened and struggled to his feet to halt the pressure. The rope jerked and he found himself standing on his tip toes.

"Let down the judge!" Able recognized Big Cole as the man limping out of the side door of the Clamper's Hall and pushing his way through the Nevada posse. "I'll give you—but take that rope off the judge!"

ANGER, resentful anger, raked Able Cain. If Big Cole had followed orders. If he had sent the men from Auburn, then got up on the summit and

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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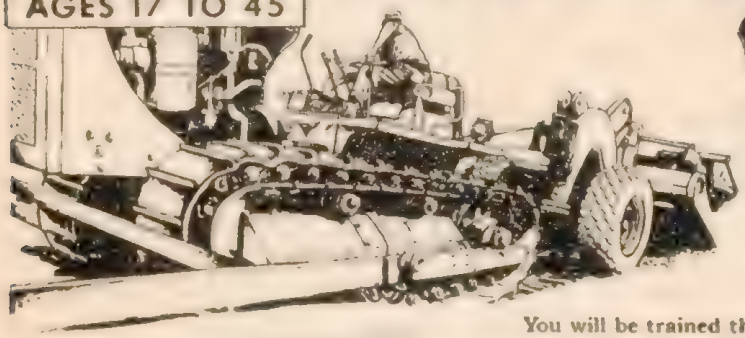

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found Pike; instead of hiding in the Clamper's Hall and now clumping out into his pack of wolves, maybe they would have given this Nevada pack a taste of California war.

"If it ain't him!" chortled Chips Banko reaching out and hitting Cole Murrell a clout on the jaw. "If it ain't him comin' out of his hidy-hole an' jest to save his pal Cain!"

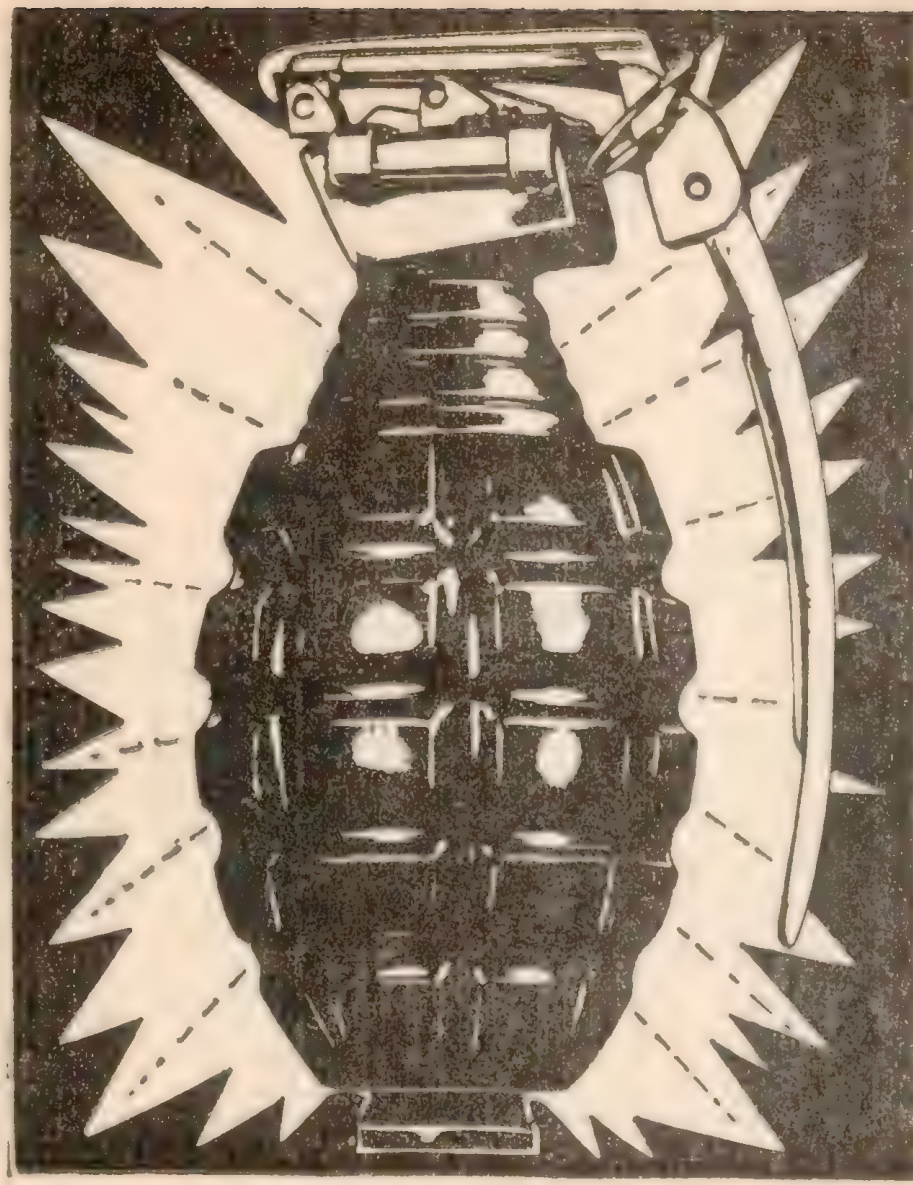
Tightlipped, under Chips Banko's blow, Big Cole fell. Fell in the same studied manner, Able suddenly realized, that he had fallen when Able first disarmed the wooden legged man. Able tensed as Big Cole rolled away from the fancy boot that Judge Marshall was viciously jabbing into the fallen man's ribs.

"Let him alone!" Able strained forward and felt the rope cut into his windpipe. "We have law to handle all this..."

"*My* law!" Riley Marshall's jaundiced face turned red from his exertion. "Lynch law!"

The man was rabid, Able realized. Stark mad with vengeance. He had to be mad to

[*Turn To Page* 126]



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invade Apex with a posse of gunslingers. To drag a California judge through Apex's streets and loop a rope around his neck. Riley Marshall, long the kingpin of Nevada, had let his power-lust completely obsess him; ignoring the consequences of any act his madness drove him into committing. That he would murder Big Cole in cold blood was apparent. And his paid gunslingers, immune to any sense of decency and bought off by gold, would aid and abet the madman's fury. To them, this was the present. They had Big Cole Murrell and they would kill him. Let the law of California—or the United States—go to hell!

ABLE FLINCHED as Riley Marshall stepped forward and in his rage, raised the bag holding the pigeon and smashed the bound judge full in the face. "H o i s t him into hell!" screamed Riley Marshall.

The bag slipped from the enraged hand and the sack m o u t h flew open. The tousled bird staggered out of the sack and looked blearily around. Able felt the rope tighten and gulped frantically for a last breath. Riley Marshall, screaming, had turned back to the prone form of Big Cole and was aiming a kick at the man's face. Chips Banko calmly shifted the rifle and drew a sixgun as he began to circle the kicking Marshall, anxious to put a slug into Big Cole.

Able Cain swore and kicked out at Chips Banko. He felt the rope loosen a bit on his windpipe and lunged. At that moment he heard the whirr of wings and Wild Bill, like a plummet, broke into the fight; his spurs raking at Chips Banko's con-

[*Turn Page*]

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torted face.

ABLE CAUGHT a glimpse of Big Cole. The man had leaned back until his shoulders were flat on the ground. The wooden leg had come up and he was braced on the good knee. Again Able heard that click, as if of a rifle cocking, and then a roar as Big Cole's wooden leg spat a slug into Riley Marshall's belly. The watch mob disintegrated and even as the man fell, Big Cole was aiming the wooden leg at the swearing Chips Banko. He fired again. The manhunter screamed and dropped.

A stunned silence, broken only by the whirr of Wild Bill's wings, fell over the Nevada posse.

Able Cain swiftly caught the consternation generated by

[*Turn To Page* 130]

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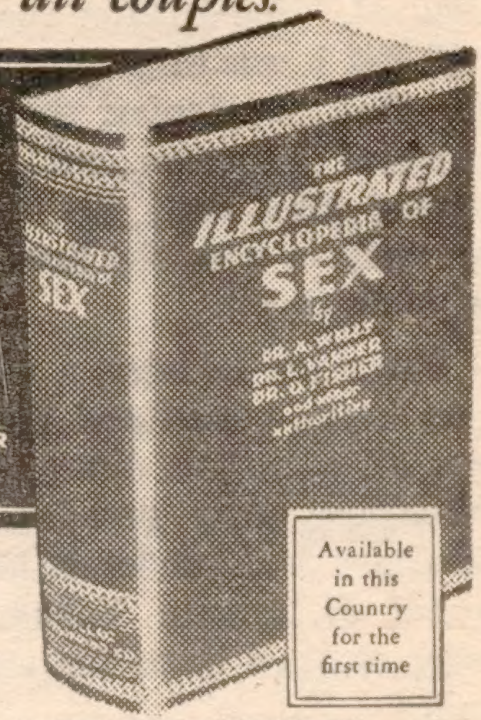

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the death of their leaders and shouted, "You'd better run for it!" But it was already too late for that. A yipping score of mounted horsemen, led by a yelling Pike Peel, was racing savagely in from the head end of Main Street.

For a few minutes, a miniature battle blazed and then it was all over. The disorganized Nevadans were rounded up, disarmed and, under a heavy guard of Auburn Volunteers, were escorted down the mountain.

PIKE PEEL was pouring drinks into a pair of shaking glasses held by Judge Able Cain and Big Cole Murrell. Able was propped on his bed while Big Cole straddled a chair. Pike was powder stained and jubilant as he lowered the bottle and swigged down a gulp of whiskey.

"I sent that pigeon-buzzard with a message as soon as I saw them posse men comin' up the pass." Pike scowled. "An' what's he do but fly straight down an' take a swat at Chips Banko's fur hat! I seen them catch him so I took off for Auburn for help. An' we got here just in time, eh?"

"And you?" Able growled at Big Cole. "Why didn't you do what I ordered instead of coming back alone?"

"I know that Riley Marshall," rasped Big Cole. "He come in here and find me missing—he's just crazy enough to hang himself a judge—like he almost done, anyway!" He added, jocularly. "Eh?"

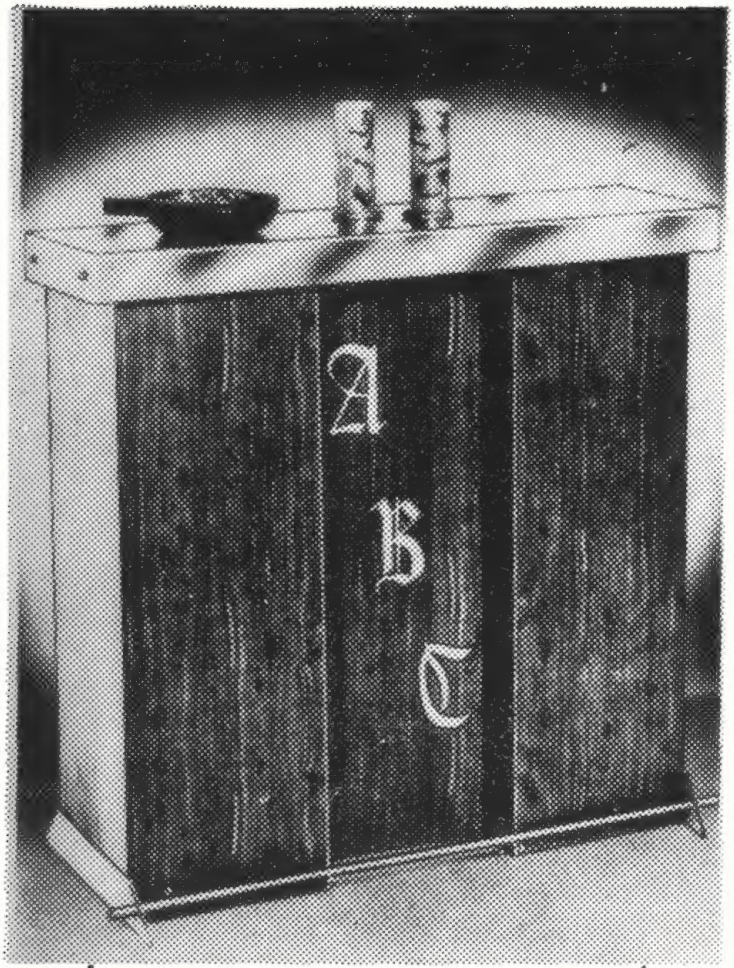
"But that leg gun?" argued Able. "Why didn't you use that when I took your guns?"

"What for?" grinned Big Cole. "You wasn't fixin' to cause me no harm. Anyway, if I'd a used it then, everybody'd known about it. Understand? Figured I'd save it for Chips Banko and Riley Marshall."

"Drink up," hooted Pike Peel. "Drink up to a crazy, fightin' pigeon, a half-hung judge, an' a wooden leg that shoots forty-five slugs. May the combination never be needed again!"

"Amen!" sang out the judge and the three men of Apex drank.

★



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